One more time

—"Instead of stressed, I lie here charmed

'Cause there's nothing else to do

Every me and every you."

Placebo - Every You Every Me

The heat came on a Thursday.

Not the Bangkok heat—the other kind. The kind that started in the low back like a match struck against the base of the spine and spread upward and outward in slow, rolling waves that turned the body into a landscape of want, every nerve ending rewriting itself from functional to desperate in the space of a single afternoon.

Lego had been expecting it. He tracked his cycles the way he tracked everything else in his physical practice—with discipline, with precision, with the careful, millimeter-aware attention of a person who knew that his body was both his instrument and his livelihood and that a one-inch mistake at fifteen feet was a broken neck. He had an app. He had a calendar. He had a small, pastel-pink notebook in his bedside drawer where he recorded the dates and the durations and the intensities, because omegas who didn't track their heats were omegas who got caught off guard, and getting caught off guard meant vulnerability, and vulnerability without a safe place to land was just falling without a mat.

He had a safe place now.

He had Tui.

The text went out at 3:17 PM, while Lego was sitting on the floor of his penthouse living room, his back against the couch, his legs pulled up to his chest, his hair—all of it, black and endless and pooling around him like spilled ink—falling over his knees. He was wearing one of the outfits his body craved during the pre-heat hours: a cream-colored camisole made of silk so thin it was practically theoretical, edged with lace and a pair of shorts that were not really shorts but the bottom half of a set that was designed to be looked at rather than worn, sheer and ribboned and utterly impractical. His feet were bare. His fake nails were off—he'd removed them an hour ago, along with the septum ring and the tongue piercing, the way he always did when his body started shifting from performance mode to survival mode. The earrings stayed. They always stayed. They were the last layer between Lego-the-brand and Lego-the-person, and he needed at least one layer, because without any layers at all, he was just a twenty-year-old omega on the floor of a too-big apartment, alone, waiting for the wave to hit.

Lego: Tuitui

Lego: it's starting

Lego: can you come

Three messages. No emojis. No exclamation marks. The stripped-down syntax of a person who was conserving energy for something more urgent than punctuation.

The response came in eleven seconds.

Tui: On my way. 20 minutes.

Tui: Drink water. I'm bringing food.

Lego: i don't want food i want you

Tui: You're getting both.

Lego stared at the screen. The warmth in his lower belly pulsed—not painfully, not yet, but with the steady, insistent rhythm of a tide coming in, each wave a little closer, a little higher, a little more impossible to ignore. The pre-heat was the cruelest part. It gave you enough clarity to know what was coming but not enough distance to pretend it wasn't. It turned the world into a sensory assault: colors too bright, sounds too loud, smells—God, smells—too much, too vivid, too saturated with information that the omega brain processed as data about safety and threat and mate, where is my mate, why isn't my mate here yet.

He could smell himself. The sweet, honey-thick scent that leaked from his skin during heat—concentrated at the wrists, the neck, the soft hollows behind his ears—was already filling the apartment, mixing with the residual Baccarat Rouge and the faint, lingering chemical sweetness of the nail polish he'd removed and the fabric softener on the aerial silks hanging from the living room beam. The penthouse, which normally smelled of him in the diffuse, background way that any lived-in space smelled of its inhabitant, now smelled of him in the foreground—loud, insistent, a scent that said omega and ready and come here, come here, come here.

But underneath it—woven through it, like a thread through silk—was the ghost of another scent. Rain and mineral and the cool, clean musk of an alpha who smelled like a city after a storm.

Tui.

The scent was on the couch behind him. On the blanket Tui had left here three nights ago. On the hoodie hanging over the back of the kitchen chair—a gray, unremarkable, secondhand hoodie that Tui wore to his midnight graffiti runs and that Lego had stolen and refused to return, not because it fit—it didn't; it swallowed him, the sleeves falling past his fingertips, the hem hitting mid-thigh—but because it smelled like safety. Like patience. Like the bass notes of a person who had learned, on a Pattaya shore, that the tide came in on its own schedule and the only

response was to stand in the sand and let it.

Lego reached behind him, pulled the hoodie off the chair, and pressed it to his face.

Inhaled.

The effect was immediate. The omega brain—that ancient, pre-linguistic engine that ran on scent and touch and the biochemistry of bonding—recognized the smell and released. The tension in his shoulders dropped. The anxiety in his chest loosened. The heat in his belly shifted from desperate to anticipatory, the difference between drowning and swimming: same water, different relationship to the surface.

He's coming, the brain said. Your alpha is coming. Be patient.

Lego was not patient. Lego had never been patient. Patience was Tui's language; Lego's was urgency. But with the hoodie against his face and the scent of rain filling his sinuses, he could approximate patience. He could wait.

He waited.

Twenty-two minutes.

Tui arrived smelling like the evening.

Bangkok evening—warm, jasmine-edged, the exhaust and the flowers and the food carts all layered together into a scent that was chaotic and alive and entirely itself. He came through the unlocked door carrying a paper bag from the vegetarian place three blocks from Lego's building—the one that made the congee that Lego could eat during heat without his stomach rebelling, because Tui knew this, because Tui knew everything about Lego's body and its needs and its rhythms, not because he'd studied them clinically but because he'd paid attention, the way he paid attention to the light on a rusted gate or the grain of reclaimed wood: with the steady, unhurried focus of a person who believed that everything deserved to be seen.

He set the bag on the kitchen counter. Took off his shoes. Hung his camera bag—the one with the Leica, always the Leica—on the hook by the door, beside Lego's collection of handbags and backpacks that multiplied like a colorful, chaotic organism.

Then he turned and looked at the living room.

Lego was on the floor.

The image hit Tui the way certain photographs hit—not as a composition to be evaluated but as a feeling to be absorbed. Lego on the hardwood, legs curled beneath him, drowning in Tui's gray hoodie that was enormous on his small frame,

the cream camisole visible underneath it where the collar had slipped off one shoulder, the lace edging catching the warm light from the floor-to-ceiling windows. His hair, unbraided, unclipped, free of every accessory, falling around him like a stage curtain for a one-person show. His face—bare, no makeup, no lenses, he'd taken them out; his natural dark eyes were exposed, wide and wet and looking at Tui with the expression that was both the most honest and the most devastating thing Tui had ever seen on another human being—was flushed. Pink across the cheekbones. Pink down the neck. Pink disappearing beneath the stolen hoodie into territory that Tui knew intimately and that still, every single time, made his chest tighten with a protectiveness so fierce it was almost violent.

The scent hit him next.

Honey. Strawberry. That warm, sweet, unmistakably omega-in-heat fragrance that Lego's body produced like a signal fire—not subtle, not polite, not the everyday background sweetness that Tui had grown accustomed to. This was the amplified version. The version that spoke directly to the alpha brainstem and said, in a language older than words: yours. Come get what's yours.

Tui's jaw tightened. His hands, at his sides, flexed once—a controlled response, a managed response, the response of a man who had learned that the first instinct was not always the right one and that patience, even in the face of biological imperative, was a form of love.

"Hi, Sweetheart."

Lego's lower lip trembled. Not sadly—impatiently. The tremble of a person who was holding back a wave by willpower alone and was very, very tired of holding.

"You took twenty-two minutes," Lego said. His voice was hoarse. Lower than usual. The heat voice—the one that stripped away the brightness and the performance and left behind something raw and unfinished, a vocal cord exposed. "You said twenty."

"Traffic."

"I hate Traffic."

"Everyone hates Traffic." Tui crossed the room. Knelt in front of Lego—the same way he'd knelt beside the bed the first time, bringing himself to eye level, equal, with. "How bad?"

"Scale?"

"Scale."

Lego considered. The scale was their invention—a 1-to-10 system they'd developed three heats ago, when they were still new at this, still learning each other's bodies

the way Tui learned a new camera: carefully, with respect for the mechanism, with awareness that the instrument was precious and irreplaceable and deserved to be handled well.

"Six," Lego said. "But climbing. Tui, it's climbing."

"I know. I can smell it."

"Can you—" His hand shot out and grabbed Tui's wrist. The grip was strong—aerial-silk strong, the strength of a person who held their body in the air for a living—and it was trembling. "Can you just— be closer? I need you closer. I know that's—I know I'm always saying that, I know I'm always—"

"Hey." Tui covered Lego's hand with his own. The temperature difference was immediate: Lego's skin was furnace-hot, the metabolic surge of heat turning his body into something that radiated warmth the way the Bangkok pavement radiated the day's stored sun. "You never have to apologize for needing me close."

Lego made a sound. Half whimper, half laugh. The sound of a person who was being told something they desperately needed to hear and didn't know how to receive it, because receiving kindness that was freely given was, the most disorienting experience of all.

Tui sat down beside him. Against the couch. Let Lego rearrange himself—and Lego always rearranged himself, always reconfigured the geometry of their bodies until the contact was exactly right, and during heat, the need for contact wasn't just emotional. It was chemical. The omega body, flooded with hormones that screamed bond bond bond, demanded skin-on-skin with the same non-negotiable urgency that it demanded oxygen.

Lego ended up in Tui's lap.

Not elegantly—desperately. He climbed into the space between Tui's spread knees and settled there, thighs bracketing Tui's hips, the hem of the stolen hoodie riding up to reveal the sheer shorts and the lace-edged camisole and the flushed, heat-brightened skin of his thighs. His arms went around Tui's neck. His face went into the curve of Tui's throat—directly against the scent gland, where the rain-and-mineral alpha smell was strongest—and he inhaled.

The sound he made was guttural. An omega sound, produced by a part of the brain that predated language and didn't require it. A sound that was not sweet or cute or performative but animal, honest, the vocal expression of a body finding the scent it needed and flooding itself with relief.

"There," Lego breathed against Tui's neck. "There. God, Tui, there."

Tui held him. Both arms. Full wrap. The hold of a man who had lifted Lego off the

ground many times—in joy, in play, in the casual, physical exuberance of a group of young men who expressed affection through wrestling and piggyback rides and the cheerful violence of friendship. But this hold was different. This hold was structural. Load-bearing. The kind of hold that said I am the ground beneath you and you will not fall.

"Eat first," Tui said. Gently. Not a command—never a command; Tui did not command, Tui guided, the way he guided his camera toward a subject, with patience and attention and the implicit understanding that the subject's comfort mattered more than the shot. "You need food before it peaks."

"I can't eat. My stomach is—"

"Congee. The plain one. Three spoonfuls. Then me. Deal?"

Lego pulled back. His face was a landscape of competing impulses: the heat-driven urgency that wanted now now now, and the rational, disciplined part—the part that calculated drop distances and silk tensions and understood that preparation was not the enemy of spontaneity but its prerequisite—that knew Tui was right.

"Three spoonfuls," Lego negotiated. "And you don't leave. You stay right here while I eat."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise."

"Sweetheart. I promise."

Lego ate the congee. Tui held the bowl because Lego's hands were shaking too much to hold it himself, and Lego ate from the spoon that Tui lifted to his mouth, and the intimacy of this—the feeding, the care, the way Tui wiped a drop from Lego's chin with his thumb and Lego caught the thumb between his lips and held it there for a beat too long, his tongue pressing against the pad of it, his eyes dark and steady and communicating something that had nothing to do with congee—was almost unbearable in its tenderness.

Three spoonfuls became five because Tui coaxed the last two with quiet, fond persistence, and Lego ate them because saying no to Tui—to the man who made warm milk with honey and remembered everyone's coffee order and carried a first-aid kit of care in everything he did—was a skill Lego had never developed and never wanted to.

"Good?" Tui asked, setting the bowl aside.

"Good. Now please."

They didn't make it to the bedroom.

They didn't make it to the bedroom because Lego, the moment the congee bowl left Tui's hands, surged forward and kissed him with the full, unmanaged force of an omega at a seven on the scale and climbing, and Tui—patient, kind, measured Tui—responded with the deep, chest-level growl that he only ever made in these moments, the alpha sound that said I hear you, I have you, I'm here, and the growl traveled through Lego's body the way bass traveled through sand, vibrating in his bones, his ribs, his teeth, and after that, the bedroom was simply too far.

The couch. They were on the couch.

Lego was straddling Tui's lap again, but now the hoodie was gone—pulled over his head and thrown somewhere behind them with the force of a person removing a barrier—and underneath was the camisole, the cream silk with the lace, and Tui's hands were on his waist, on the silk, feeling the heat of Lego's skin through the fabric the way you felt sunlight through a window: filtered but unmistakable.

"Off," Lego panted against Tui's mouth. His fingers were pulling at Tui's shirt—the plain, earth-toned t-shirt that Tui wore like a uniform, practical and unassuming, the opposite of Lego's entire wardrobe philosophy. "Off, off, off—"

"Slow down."

"I don't want to slow down. I want—"

"I know what you want. You'll get it. Slow down."

This was their dynamic. Had been since the first heat they'd shared—three months ago, in Tui's apartment, on the bed with the clean sheets, the night that the distance closed and kept closing. Lego ran hot. Lego ran fast. Lego's heat made him urgent and vocal and demanding in a way that was both completely authentic and completely different from his everyday sweetness—not replacing the sweetness but amplifying it, turning the volume up until the signal distorted and what came out was raw and hungry and shameless. And Tui—Tui was the ground. Tui was the tempo. Tui was the person who said slow down not because he didn't want to go fast but because he knew, with the instinct of a photographer who understood timing, that the best moments were the ones you didn't rush past.

Tui pulled his shirt off. Lego's hands were on his chest immediately—the flat palms, the strong fingers, the diagnostic touch that read muscles and heartbeat and skin temperature and translated them into data about safety and desire and how much does he want me, how much does he want me, please let him want me as much as I want him.

Tui wanted him. The evidence was undeniable—pressed against Lego's inner thigh through two layers of fabric, hard and hot and producing a groan from Lego that

was so satisfied, so relieved, that it sounded almost like crying.

"You want me." Lego said. Not a question. A confirmation. The verbal version of touching a surface to check that it was real.

"Always. Every time. I don't get used to wanting you."

"Tui."

"I mean it. Every time you show up at my door, every time you're in my lap, every time you smell like this—" He pressed his nose to Lego's neck, directly against the scent gland, and inhaled the way Lego had inhaled from his hoodie: deep, deliberate, claiming. The honey-strawberry scent was so concentrated here that it was almost a taste—thick and sweet on the back of his tongue, coating his senses, reprogramming his brain from person to alpha, from patient to starving. "You smell like everything I want."

Lego whimpered. The omega whimper—high, thin, involuntary, produced by a nervous system that was being told exactly what it needed to hear by exactly the person it needed to hear it from. His hips rolled forward, grinding down against Tui with a rhythm that was instinctive, tidal, the body seeking friction the way the tide sought the shore: inevitably, repeatedly, unable to stop.

"Camisole," Tui said. His hands found the hem. "Can I?"

"Yes. Yes, please, take it—"

He drew the silk up and over Lego's head. The lace caught on an earring; Tui freed it gently, his fingers steady even as the rest of his body was alive with the particular, focused intensity of an alpha scenting a heat-drenched omega at close range. The camisole joined the hoodie on the floor. Lego was bare from the waist up—chest flushed pink, the nipple piercing catching the warm light of the penthouse's enormous windows, the navel piercing glinting below.

"Beautiful," Tui said. This beautiful was whole. It encompassed everything—the piercings and the flush and the trembling shoulders and the long, long hair falling around Lego's face like a frame for a painting that no gallery could hold. "You're so beautiful, Sweetheart."

"Then touch me—"

Tui touched him.

His mouth went to Lego's neck first—the gland, the epicenter, the place where the scent was so thick it was almost visible. He kissed it, open-mouthed, and Lego's entire body shuddered, a full-system response, the aerial equivalent of a drop: the moment of freefall, the surrender to gravity, the trust that the silk—that Tui—would catch him. His hands gripped Tui's shoulders. His nails—natural, short, bare—dug

into the muscle. His head fell back, exposing the full column of his throat—an omega gesture, ancient and unambiguous: I trust you. I'm yours. Here is the most vulnerable part of me and I'm offering it because you've never once made me regret being vulnerable with you.

Tui's teeth grazed the gland.

Lego gasped. His hips jerked. The shorts—the sheer, ribboned shorts that were never meant for anything as practical as being worn—were soaked. The slick had been building since before Tui arrived, the omega body's preparation, its biological welcome mat, and now it was everywhere: hot and wet against Lego's thighs, against the fabric, against Tui's jeans where their hips met. The smell of it intensified the honey scent tenfold—thick, sweet, unmistakable, the olfactory equivalent of a neon sign that said READY in letters that could be read from space.

"Tui—Tui, I need—please, I'm at—I think I'm at eight, I'm at eight—"

"I've got you."

"I need you inside me—"

"I know. I know, Sweetheart. Let me take care of you."

The shorts came off. Tui's fingers hooked under the waistband—the ribboned, lace-trimmed waistband of a garment that cost more than his monthly rent and that neither of them cared about right now—and drew them down Lego's legs, over his knees, off his feet. Lego kicked them away with the impatience of a person shedding a skin he'd outgrown.

Lego was naked in Tui's lap. In the golden light of the penthouse, with the aerial silks hanging from the ceiling beam above them like witnesses, raspberry-colored and still, and the congee cooling on the counter and the city sprawling outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, unaware and unconcerned, as it always was, as all cities always were, with the private enormities happening behind glass.

Lego's body was a canvas of contradictions. Delicate and strong. Decorated and vulnerable. The piercings—navel, nipple, ears—were small points of silver against flushed skin, the deliberate adornments of a person who treated his body as art. The muscles of his thighs and arms, shaped by years of aerial work, were firm beneath skin that was heat-soft and trembling. The slick glistened on his inner thighs, catching the light.

"You too," Lego breathed, pulling at Tui's jeans. "I want to feel you. All of you. Now."

Tui lifted his hips. Lego helped—both of them working together to remove the jeans and the boxers, the practical, earth-toned, secondhand-shop clothing of a man who recycled everything and wasted nothing, and when the last layer was gone and they

were skin-to-skin, fully, completely, with nothing between them but heat and want and seven months of accumulated trust—

Lego made a sound that was not any word in any language. It was pure signal, pure omega, the sound of a body recognizing its match at the cellular level. He pressed his forehead against Tui's. Their noses touched. Their breath mingled—strawberry and rain, sweet and mineral, omega and alpha, the two scents intertwining in the small space between their mouths until neither could tell where one ended and the other began.

"I love you," Lego said. Just like that. No buildup, no preamble. Dropped into the space between breaths like a stone into still water. "I love you and I need you to know that before— because I know my heat makes me say things, and I know you wonder which things are the heat and which things are me, and I need you to know: this one is me. This is just me."

Tui's hands cradled Lego's face. Thumbs on his cheekbones. Fingertips in his hair. The hold of a photographer framing the most important shot of his life and knowing, with absolute certainty, that no camera could capture what he was seeing, because what he was seeing was not an image but a person—a whole, real, complicated, terrified, brave person who was offering themselves completely and asking only that the offering be received.

"I love you too," Tui said. "And it's not a response. It's a fact. It's been a fact since the restaurant. Since the sheer top and the platform boots. Since you looked at me across a table and I felt—"

"What?"

"Found. Like I'd been taking pictures of the whole world trying to find the right subject and then you sat down and—there it was."

Lego kissed him. Hard and deep and wet, the tongue piercing—he'd left the tongue piercing in, the only one he'd kept—clicking against Tui's teeth, and Tui groaned into his mouth, the alpha growl building in his chest again, reverberating through both their bodies.

Then Lego shifted. Rose up on his knees. Reached between them and took Tui in his hand—the grip confident, strong, steady despite the trembling everywhere else—and positioned himself with the precision of a person who calculated distances for a living.

"Ready?" Lego whispered.

"That's my line."

"I'm stealing it. Ready?"

"Yeah, Sweetheart. I'm ready."

Lego sank down.

Slowly. Despite everything—the heat, the urgency, the eight-on-the-scale desperation—slowly. Because Lego understood, with the body-knowledge of a performer, that the most powerful moments were the ones you controlled. The drop from the silk was three feet of freefall that lasted less than a second, but the climb to the drop point was measured and deliberate, each wrap calculated, each position chosen, because the beauty of the fall was proportional to the discipline of the ascent.

He descended inch by inch. Eyes locked on Tui's. Mouth open. The sound he made—a continuous, shaking exhale, a sustained note, a breath held and released in increments—filled the penthouse the way music filled a room: completely, inescapably, changing the quality of the air itself.

Tui's hands were on Lego's hips. Not guiding—supporting. The way the crash mat supported a drop: present, reliable, there to absorb the impact without directing it. His fingers pressed into the soft skin above the hip bones, and his own breath was ragged, his own control fraying, because the heat of Lego's body around him was extraordinary—tight and slick and radiating warmth that bordered on fever, the omega body doing what it was designed to do: receive, welcome, hold.

When Lego bottomed out—when the descent was complete and they were flush against each other, connected at the deepest point, the distance between them not just closed but eliminated—Lego let his head fall forward onto Tui's shoulder and shook.

Not with pain. Not with sadness. With the full-body tremor of a system receiving exactly what it needed after hours of deprivation—the relief so intense it registered as overwhelm, the way a first breath after being underwater was both lifesaving and agonizing. His body clenched around Tui in rhythmic pulses—involuntary, omega, the biological grip that said don't leave don't leave don't leave.

"I'm not leaving," Tui murmured into his hair. Because he could read the grip the way he read everything Lego did—as communication, as language, as the physical expression of a fear so old and so deep that no amount of birthday cards or dried flowers could fully quiet it. "I'm right here. I'm staying."

"Move," Lego begged. "Please, Tui. Move."

Tui moved.

They were teenagers. That was what it felt like. Not in the literal sense—Lego was

twenty, Tui was twenty-two, they had jobs and apartments and the accumulated emotional complexity of two people who had survived difficult childhoods and found each other in the wreckage. But in the way they wanted—in the sheer, relentless, unsophisticated hunger of it—they were fifteen. They were sixteen. They were every age at which the body discovers pleasure and decides, with the categorical absolutism of youth, that nothing else in the world matters as much as this, again, more, don't stop.

The couch was the first round.

Lego rode Tui with the focused, rhythmic intensity of a person whose core strength was professional-grade. His thighs worked. His abs engaged. His hands braced on Tui's shoulders, and his hips rolled in waves that were not learned but instinctual—the omega body knowing, at a level below thought, exactly how to move to maximize contact, depth, the angle that hit the spot that turned his voice from words into raw, escalating sound.

He was vocal. Tui had known this since their first time—had expected it, because Lego was vocal about everything: his excitement, his affection, his displeasure with a brand deal's creative direction. But the bedroom vocal was different. It was stripped of performance. It was the unedited audio of a person experiencing pleasure without the filter of self-consciousness, and it sounded like this: broken sentences, fragmented endearments, Tui's name repeated like a mantra that was holding the world together.

"Tui—there, right there, don't stop, don't—oh—"

"I've got you."

"Harder—can you—I need it harder—"

Tui's hips snapped up. The thrust met Lego's descent, and the impact drew a sound from both of them—a groan from Tui, deep and involuntary, the alpha equivalent of an earthquake; a cry from Lego, sharp and bright, the sound of a body being given exactly what it asked for at exactly the intensity it needed.

"Yes—yes, like that, like that, Tui, tuitui—"

The nickname in this context was devastating. Tuitui. The playful, silly, affectionate name that Lego used in texts and at group dinners and on lazy Sunday mornings, now gasped and broken and desperate, repurposed from sweetness to sex without losing any of its tenderness. It was still tender. Everything between them was tender, even this—especially this—because tenderness was not softness. Tenderness was the careful handling of something precious, and careful handling could be hard and fast and deep enough to make the couch creak.

Lego came the first time with his face buried in Tui's neck, crying out against the

scent gland, his body clenching in rhythmic waves that pulled Tui over the edge with him. Tui's knot swelled—the alpha response, the biological lock, the physical manifestation of I'm staying—and Lego whimpered as it caught, his body stretching to accommodate, his thighs trembling against Tui's hips.

They stayed locked for eleven minutes.

Lego cried. Not from pain—from release. Tui held him through it. Stroked his hair. Kissed his temple. Said nothing, because nothing needed to be said, and because the silence between them had never been empty: full, present, alive with the texture of the moment.

When the knot released, Lego pulled back. His face was wrecked—tear-streaked, flushed, swollen-lipped—and smiling. The real smile. The underneath smile. The one that no Instagram filter could replicate.

"Again." he said.

"Now?"

"Now."

"You just—"

"I know. Again."

This was the heat talking—and it wasn't. It was Lego. Lego, who kept everything, who hoarded pleasure the way he hoarded birthday cards, who wanted more not because he was insatiable but because he was terrified that if he stopped, the feeling would end, and if the feeling ended, it might not come back, and temporary was the only thing in the world that Lego could not survive.

"Okay," Tui said. Smiling. The patient, knowing smile of a man who had been given an assignment he was happy to repeat. "Again."

"And maybe after that, again."

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm trying to keep you."

The second round was on the floor.

Tui laid Lego down on the crash mat beneath the aerial silks—the thick velvet mat that existed to break Lego's falls, to catch his drops, to be the ground when the air ran out—and it felt right. It felt like a metaphor that Tui, if he'd been less occupied, would have photographed. Lego on the mat. The silk above him. The same apparatus that held him in the air now cushioning him as he lay beneath his alpha, hair spread around his head like a black halo, hands reaching up, fingers tangling in

the silk above them out of habit, gripping the fabric the way he gripped everything: tightly, desperately, with the full-body commitment of a person who understood that letting go was easy and holding on was the real skill.

Tui entered him slowly this time. All the way down, eyes locked, the deliberate pace of a photographer waiting for the perfect light. Lego's legs wrapped around his waist—those strong, silk-trained legs—and pulled him in deeper, and the sound Lego made was a word, a single word, the sweetest word he knew: "Home."

They moved together. Tui's hands were in Lego's hair, spread across the mat, the black silk tangling around his fingers the way the aerial silk tangled above them. Lego's heels pressed into Tui's lower back, urging, guiding, the physical communication of a person whose entire life was a conversation between his body and gravity. The pace built—steady, then faster, then the rhythm that stopped being rhythm and became just need, raw and mutual, two bodies speaking the only language that couldn't be faked.

"Don't stop—Tui, please—don't stop, don't—"

"Never stopping, Sweetheart—"

"I'm close—I'm so close—I'm—Tui—"

The second orgasm tore through Lego with a force that bowed his back off the mat—an arabesque, an arch, the same shape his body made on the silks when it was suspended between earth and sky. His hands pulled the aerial silk above him, the fabric going taut, his grip reflexive and unbreakable. Tui followed him—knot swelling, catching, locking them together.

Lego's legs tightened. His hands released the silk and found Tui's back instead, palms flat against the muscles, fingers pressing into the skin hard enough to leave marks—marks that Tui would find tomorrow in the bathroom mirror and trace with his fingertips the way Lego had traced his scar.

Proof. Physical proof. The only currency Lego's heart accepted.

They lay on the crash mat, knotted, breathing hard, the silk swaying gently above them from where Lego had pulled it. The penthouse was saturated with their combined scent—honey-strawberry-rain-mineral, omega-alpha, sweet-clean, a smell that was not two smells layered but one smell fused, the olfactory evidence of a bond that was no longer being built but was being lived in.

"Tui?"

"Mm."

"One more?"

"Sweetheart. It's been twenty minutes."

"And?"

"And your heat is—"

"My heat is at a nine. That's why I'm saying one more. Please. I need—" He shifted against Tui's knot and they both hissed—the sensitivity, the over-stimulation, the too-much that was also not enough. "I need to be so full of you that the heat can't fit. I need you to take up all the space so there's no room for the wanting."

Tui looked down at him. At this impossible, impractical, sentimental creature on a crash mat, hair like spilled ink, piercings catching the light, asking for more not because he was greedy but because his heart was a vault that had been empty for twenty years and was only now, finally, being filled.

"One more," Tui agreed. "And then the bed. And then water. And then more congee. And then you're sleeping."

"And then in the morning?"

"And then in the morning, again. And the next morning. And the one after that."

Lego's smile was the sunrise.

The third time—the bedroom, the sheets, the blackout of the bedroom that was not dark but private, a darkness that belonged only to them—was slow. Deliberately, almost agonizingly slow. Tui behind him, chest against Lego's back, one hand on his hip and the other wrapped around his chest, palm flat over the nipple piercing, holding him the way you hold something you're afraid to break, except Lego was not breakable. Lego was the person who held himself in the air by his hands. Lego was the person who took the drops and trusted the silk. Lego was the bravest person Tui had ever met, and the bravery was not in the acrobatics or the piercings or the gender-norm-breaking campaigns—it was in this. In the willingness to open his body and his heart at the same time and say fill both of them, I trust you, I'm not afraid.

Tui moved in him with the rhythm of the tide. In and out. Slow and deep. Lego talked. The whole time, Lego talked. Not coherently—not in sentences that would survive transcription—but in fragments that were, in their own way, a love letter written in real time:

"—you feel so good—you always feel so—I can't believe you're real—I can't believe you're mine—nobody's ever been mine—I keep things but nobody ever let me keep them—"

"You can keep me."

"—I want to—I want to keep you forever—I want to wake up smelling like you—I want your hoodie and your coffee order and your stupid vintage lenses—"

"They're not stupid—"

"—they're perfect, you're perfect, everything about you is—oh—right there, right there, don't move, don't—"

"I'm not moving."

"You just moved."

"That was a thrust, Sweetheart. Different thing."

"Do it again—"

He did it again. And again. And again. And each time, Lego's voice climbed higher and his body pressed back harder and the slick between them made everything wet and warm and frictionless in a way that was pornographic and sacred simultaneously, and Tui thought: this is what it means. This is what all of it means—the recycling, the no-waste philosophy, the belief that nothing is truly trash. Because this—this body, this person, this heart that keeps everything—this is the most valuable thing I've ever found, and I found it the way I find everything: by looking at what other people walked past.

The third orgasm was quieter. Not less intense—Lego's body shook through it, clenching around Tui with the rhythmic grip of the tide, his hands fisting the sheets, his mouth open against the pillow—but the sound he made was not a cry. It was Tui's name. Just his name. Spoken once, clearly, completely, in the underneath voice, the real voice, the voice that belonged to the boy beneath every layer of makeup and lace and light-colored lenses.

Tui.

A name. A whole life folded into a single syllable.

Tui knotted in him for the third time that night, and the feeling was—he didn't have a word for it. Not in Thai, not in English, not in the visual language of photography that was his most fluent tongue. It was the feeling of a darkroom developing an image—the slow emergence of shape from darkness, the chemical revelation of something that had been there all along, waiting to be seen.

They lay in the knot's lock. Spooned. Tui's chest against Lego's back, arm around his waist, face in his hair. The Baccarat Rouge was gone—burned off by heat and sweat and the chemical transformation of sex—and what remained was just Lego. The real scent beneath the perfume. Sweet and warm and human and his.

"Tui?"

"Sweetheart."

"This isn't temporary."

"No."

"This is the wall. This is the fridge. This is the ceiling."

"It's all of them."

"This is everything."

"Yes."

Lego's hand found Tui's on his stomach. Laced their fingers together. Squeezed with the grip of a person who held himself above the ground for a living and had finally, after twenty years of reaching, found something worth holding onto at sea level.

"Stay." Lego whispered.

"I'm staying."

"In the morning?"

"In the morning. And the next one."

"And the—"

"And every single one after that. I promise. Now sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. If I sleep, it ends."

"It doesn't end. It pauses. And when you wake up, I'll be here, and the heat will still be running, and I'll make you congee and hold you and we'll do this again. And again. And again. Until you're done. And then when you're done, I'll still be here. And it won't be because of the heat or the bond or the biology. It'll be because you're the shot I've been looking for my whole life. And I don't delete the good ones."

Silence. The long, weighted silence of a person absorbing kindness they didn't know how to receive.

Then, very quietly: "You're going to make me cry again."

"You've been crying for an hour."

"That was sex crying. This is love crying. They're different."

"They're both wet."

"Oh my God, you're the worst—"

"You love me."

"I love you so much and you're the worst and if you make one more dad joke while you're literally knotted inside me, I'm going to—"

Tui kissed the back of his neck. Directly on the gland. Lego's protest dissolved into a shudder, then a sigh, then the slow, heavy exhale of a body finally allowing itself to rest.

"Sleep, Sweetheart."

"…okay."

"I'll be here."

"…promise?"

"Lego. I've been promising all night."

"Promise one more time."

"I promise."

A pause.

"One more time."

"I promise."

"…okay."

Lego slept. Tui held him. The penthouse was dark and warm and saturated with honey and rain. The silks in the living room hung still and patient. The boxes from Lego's parents sat unopened by the door—the expensive coat, the designer shoes, the gifts that said love in the language of credit cards. On the wall above them, pinned and preserved and arranged with the curatorial devotion of a person who kept everything, were the polaroids and the birthday cards and the dried flowers—the proof, the evidence, the physical record of a life that had been lonely and was becoming less so, one held promise at a time.

Tui's phone buzzed on the nightstand. He checked it with one hand, the other still wrapped around Lego's waist.

Nut: Everything okay? Lego's not answering texts.

Tui: He's with me. Heat. He's fine. He's sleeping.

Nut: Good. Make him eat.

Tui: Already did.

Nut: Take care of him.

Tui: Always.

He set the phone down. Pressed his face back into Lego's hair. Breathed in the scent —real, unperformed, the underneath scent of the person he loved, the person who kept everything, the person who had walked barefoot through a mansion of purchased silence and come out the other side still reaching, still wanting, still insisting that touch was a language and proximity was a proof and love was a thing you held in your hands and refused, absolutely refused, to let go of.

Outside, Bangkok hummed. The city of beautiful, overlooked things.

Inside, the most beautiful one of all slept in the arms of the person who had finally, after a lifetime of watching from behind a viewfinder, put the camera down and stepped into the frame.

In the morning, Tui made congee.

Lego ate six spoonfuls without being asked.

The heat lasted three more days.

They didn't leave the apartment once.

Again? Again

—"When you're 'round

I lose myself inside your mouth

You've got brown eyes

Like no one else

Baby, make it to me."

Lady Gaga - Again Again

Tui didn't track his ruts.

This was not an oversight. It was a philosophy. The same philosophy that governed his approach to street photography and midnight graffiti and the recycled planters on his balcony: if you controlled everything, you missed the truth. The best

photographs happened when the light changed without warning. The best graffiti happened when the wall chose the design. The best basil grew when you forgot to water it for three days and it responded to the neglect by becoming furious and green and impossibly alive, as if spite were a form of photosynthesis.

His body, he believed, operated on the same principle. It would tell him when.

It told him on a Tuesday.

He was in the darkroom—the converted second bathroom, red-lit and chemical-smelling, the most private space in an apartment full of purposeful clutter—developing a roll of street portraits he'd shot the previous weekend. A woman selling jasmine garlands at a traffic light, her hands moving with the automated grace of someone who had performed the same gesture ten thousand times. A security guard asleep on a plastic chair outside a construction site, his face slack and peaceful, the uniform cap tipped forward over his eyes. A stray dog lying in a patch of sunlight on a cracked sidewalk, its body curled into the exact shape of contentment.

The images were emerging on the contact sheet—slowly, chemically, the way truth always emerged: not all at once but in layers, shadow first, then midtones, then the highlights that gave the image its breath. Tui's hands moved through the process with the fluid, unconscious competence of repetition. Tank. Developer. Stop bath. Fixer. The rhythm of it was meditative, the only ritual in his life that asked nothing of him except attention.

The heat started in his hands.

Not the chemical heat of the developer solution—that was lukewarm, precise, measured to the degree. This was a different heat entirely. Internal. Radiating outward from somewhere deep in his palms, as if the bones themselves had decided to warm, to announce, to signal. It traveled up his forearms and into his shoulders and settled at the base of his skull with the particular, weighted pressure of a headache that wasn't a headache—that was, instead, the opening movement of something orchestral, something that would build and build until the entire body was an instrument playing a single, relentless note.

Oh, Tui thought.

Not oh no. Not panic. Just oh. The flat, observational acknowledgment of a man who had spent his life paying attention to the world and was now being forced, by the crude machinery of biology, to pay attention to himself.

He set down the tongs. Looked at his hands in the red light. They were steady—of course they were steady; steadiness was his fundamental architecture, the load-bearing wall that the rest of his personality was built on—but the heat was there, pulsing beneath the skin like a second heartbeat, and he knew what it meant.

The rut was coming.

He had approximately four hours before it hit full force. Four hours of increasing temperature, increasing sensitivity, increasing want—a word that Tui, under normal circumstances, kept on a very short leash, because want was the precursor to need, and need was the precursor to asking, and asking was the thing he did for other people, not for himself. He was the one who was asked. He was the door that was always open. He was the ground beneath other people's drops. He did not drop. The ground did not drop.

Except.

The ground was warming. The ground was shifting. The ground, which had held Lego through three heats and held the group through seven months of crises and held his own grief in the quiet, load-bearing silence of a man who went to rooftops instead of therapists—the ground was beginning to tremble.

He picked up his phone.

The screen showed three unread messages from Lego—a photo of a new nail design (tiny gold moons on black), a link to a Gloomy Bear collaboration he wanted, and a voice note that Tui hadn't played yet but that he knew, without hearing it, would be Lego talking for ninety seconds about nothing and everything, his voice bright and layered and sweet in the way that strawberries were sweet: natural, not manufactured, the genuine article.

Tui stared at the screen.

The alpha brain was already doing its work—the primitive, prerational rewiring that turned the world from a panoramic landscape into a tunnel with one point of focus at the end. And the point of focus was Lego. Lego's voice note. Lego's scent memory, honey-strawberry-warm, stored in the part of Tui's brain that predated language and operated on instinct alone. Lego's body, which Tui's hands knew the way they knew the controls of the Leica—intimately, reverently, with the earned confidence of repetition and the permanent wonder of a man who could not believe he was allowed to touch something this beautiful.

He typed. Deleted. Typed again.

The problem was that Tui did not know how to ask for things. Tui didn't ask because asking required admitting that the protector also needed protection, and if the protector needed protection, then who was protecting everyone else?

His sister had been the one who protected him. Before.

His sister, who had wrapped his bleeding rib with her pink scarf on a boat in Pattaya. His sister, who had played bass-heavy music on the shore while her friends

laughed and Tui sat in the wet sand and felt the vibrations travel through the earth and into his chest and become, without his permission, the first thing he ever loved. His sister, who had been nine years older and infinite feet taller and who had died and left behind three five-year-old reasons to keep going and one twenty-two-year-old reason to never, ever let anyone see him fall apart.

The phone was still in his hand. The cursor blinked in the empty text field.

He pressed play on the voice note.

Lego's voice filled the darkroom—bright, chattering, alive with the particular, relentless energy of a person who talked to fill silence the way gardens filled cracks in concrete: automatically, compulsively, because the alternative was emptiness, and emptiness was the thing Lego feared most.

"—and then Nut literally just picked me up? Like, I was standing there talking to Hong about the campaign shoot and Nut just walked over and lifted me and I was like, excuse me, sir, I am having a conversation, and he just spun me around and put me down and walked away and Hong was dying, and anyway, I miss you, are you in the darkroom? You're in the darkroom. I can tell because you haven't answered in two hours and you only disappear for two hours when you're developing. Okay, I love you, call me back, also I made you something but it's a surprise, okay bye—"

The voice note ended. The darkroom was quiet again. Red and quiet and chemical-smelling, the sanctuary he'd built for himself in the second bathroom of a mid-range apartment in an older building with a hesitant elevator and a huge balcony full of herbs growing out of rescued containers.

Tui replayed the voice note.

Not because he'd missed anything. Because the sound of Lego's voice—the real, unedited, un-performing voice, the voice that existed between the brand and the person—did something to the alpha brain that was both calming and incendiary. It soothed the trembling and stoked the heat simultaneously, a paradox that made no biological sense and perfect emotional sense, because Lego was the paradox: the strong, fragile, terrified, brave boy who held himself in the air and fell on purpose and trusted the catch and kept every single proof that the catch was real.

Tui's rut wanted Lego the way the tide wanted the shore: not as a choice but as a physics, a fundamental law of the universe that could be observed and measured and documented but never, under any circumstances, argued with.

He typed the text.

Tui: Can you come over tonight?

The response was immediate—instantaneous, as if Lego's thumbs had been hovering over the keyboard waiting for exactly this message, which, knowing Lego, they probably had.

Lego: YES

Lego: wait why

Lego: are you okay??

Lego: tui

Lego: tuitui are you okay

Tui: I'm okay. I just need you here.

The pause that followed was loaded. Tui could feel Lego reading between the words—Lego, who used physical touch to diagnose emotions and who had spent twenty years learning to read the distance between what people said and what they meant. I just need you here. Tui, who never asked. Tui, who opened doors but never knocked on them. Tui, who needed but never said need.

Lego: oh

An emoji. A fire emoji. The most Lego possible way to ask is your rut coming without typing the words, because even Lego—loud, vocal, shameless Lego—understood that some things required a gentler vocabulary, and the gentlest vocabulary available to a twenty-year-old who communicated primarily through stickers and exclamation marks was a small, orange, pixelated flame.

Tui: Yeah.

Lego: i'm coming right now

Lego: right NOW

Lego: don't move don't do anything don't shower don't change

Tui: Why not shower?

Lego: BECAUSE I WANT TO SMELL YOU

Lego: i want the real smell tui

Lego: the darkroom and the basil and the you

Lego: don't you dare wash it off

Tui: Okay.

Lego: i'm bringing things

Tui: What things?

Lego: things!!!! supplies!!!!

Lego: and the surprise

Lego: 15 minutes

Lego: i love you i love you i love you

Tui: I love you too. Drive safe.

Lego: i'm taking a taxi i'm not an animal

Tui set down the phone. Pressed his palms flat on the darkroom counter—the chemical-stained surface, cool and slightly tacky—and breathed.

The heat was building. The bass note in his skull was louder now—not painful, not yet, but present, the way a developing photograph was present before the image emerged: there, latent, waiting for the right conditions to reveal itself. His skin was sensitized—the fabric of his shirt, a plain gray tee from a secondhand shop, suddenly felt textured against his chest in a way that was both irritating and electric, every fiber an individual point of contact, and contact was what the alpha brain wanted, demanded, with the non-negotiable urgency of a body that had been patient for everyone else's emergencies and had finally, absolutely, irrevocably run out of patience for its own.

He left the darkroom. The film could wait. The jasmine-garland woman and the sleeping security guard and the contented dog would exist in their chemical suspension until he returned, preserved in the amber of silver halide, patient the way photographs were patient: holding still until someone was ready to see them.

The apartment was his. His clutter. His purpose. The shipping-crate coffee table scattered with contact sheets. The reclaimed-pipe bookshelf. The balcony door open, letting in the warm night air and the fragrance of herbs growing out of a cracked boot and a dented tin can. The vintage lenses under their dust-proof glass, catching the light from the single floor lamp he'd left on—a lamp he'd found on the street, rewired himself, fitted with a warm-toned bulb that cast the kind of light that made everything look like a memory.

He sat on the edge of his bed.

The sheets were clean—he'd changed them that morning, which was either a coincidence or the body's preemptive knowledge, the same way the basil knew to grow before the rain came. The mattress was good—better than the rest of his furniture, because Tui understood that the place where you slept was the place

where you were most yourself, most defenseless, most in need of support, and support was worth investing in even when everything else in the apartment had been rescued from someone else's discard pile.

He pressed his hands to his face. Inhaled his own skin.

The scent was changing. His normal scent—cold glass, mineral, grey musk, the olfactory fingerprint of a man who smelled like rain on concrete—was warming. Deepening. The cold notes retreating, replaced by something denser, something with heat in it: wet stone baking in afternoon sun, mineral water heated to body temperature, the warm grey of a city that had absorbed all the day's light and was now radiating it back. It was his rut scent—the same scent, but amplified, distorted, pushed through the biological amplifier that turned rain into storm and patience into hunger and protector into something older and less civilized, something that didn't want to protect but to claim.

The word embarrassed him.

Claim. It was such an alpha word. Such a cliché. The kind of word that belonged in the cheap paperbacks he sometimes found in secondhand shops—the ones with embossed covers and breathless prose, where alphas were always claiming and omegas were always surrendering and neither party was ever a real person with a real history and a real, complicated, un-novelistic relationship to their own biology.

But the body didn't read novels. The body didn't understand cliché. The body understood heat and proximity and the specific, devastating scent of a particular omega, and when that omega was en route—fifteen minutes, I love you I love you I love you—the body's vocabulary narrowed to a single, unambiguous imperative.

Mine.

Tui sat on the bed and waited, and the waiting was harder than anything he'd done in months—harder than the long nights on rooftops, harder than the predawn drives to Pattaya, harder than holding Lego through a heat while keeping his own need on a leash—because this time, the waiting was not for someone else. It was for himself.

He was waiting for the one person who had ever made the ground feel safe enough to shake.

Lego arrived in fourteen minutes.

Not fifteen. Fourteen. Because Lego, when motivated, could compress time itself through the sheer force of his intention, as if the universe recognized that a person who kept everything deserved to arrive at things faster than everyone else.

The knock: three quick taps, a pause, one more.

Tui opened the door.

The hallway's fluorescent light was unflattering—it was always unflattering; the building was old and indifferent to aesthetics—but Lego stood in it like a figure in a painting where the artist had refused to use the available light and had simply brought their own. He was carrying two bags. One was a Gloomy Bear tote with something bulky inside. The other was a paper bag from a pharmacy, which meant supplies, which meant preparation, which meant that Lego had stopped on the way and thought about Tui's body and Tui's needs and had purchased things to address them with the focused, disciplined care that he brought to everything that mattered.

He was wearing—

Tui's brain cataloged it before he could stop himself, because the alpha brain in pre-rut was a machine for cataloging the mate, every detail, every surface, every signal:

—a black silk slip dress that fell to mid-thigh. Thin straps. Lace trim at the hem and the neckline. Over it, an oversized cardigan in dusty pink, unbuttoned, slipping off one shoulder to reveal the strap and the collarbone and the flushed, heat-adjacent skin that said I dressed for you. Black platform sandals that added three inches. Hair up—a messy, elaborate bun held together by a pink ribbon that trailed down the back of his neck like an afterthought, like a breadcrumb, like an invitation to pull.

The septum ring was in. The earrings—lobe and upper lobe on the left, lobe and helix and industrial on the right—caught the fluorescent light and turned it into tiny, scattered stars. The fake nails were on: short for Lego's standards, black with a single gold accent nail on each hand. The tongue piercing was in—Tui could see it when Lego's lips parted.

The smell hit Tui like a wall.

Strawberry. Honey. The Baccarat Rouge layered over the natural omega scent, creating a fragrance that was both manufactured and genuine—the perfume and the person, the bottle and the body, indistinguishable because Lego had worn it so long it had become him, the way Tui's darkroom chemicals had become him, absorbed into the skin and the identity until removing it would feel like removing a limb.

And underneath the strawberry and the honey—beneath the perfume, beneath the omega baseline—Tui's own scent. Faint but present. The ghost of rain and mineral on Lego's skin, residual from their last night together, three days ago, when Tui had held him on this same bed and pressed his face into his neck and breathed.

The alpha brain registered this—my scent on him, mine, he smells like me, he carries me on his skin—and the response was immediate, violent, total. Tui's hands gripped the doorframe. His vision narrowed. The hallway disappeared. The building disappeared. The city, the country, the hemisphere—all of it collapsed into a tunnel that ended at the person standing in front of him.

"Hi, Handsome." Lego said.

Tui's voice, when it came, was not his normal voice. It was lower. Rougher. The pre-rut vocal shift that thickened the vocal cords and turned speech into something closer to vibration—a sound you felt in your sternum before you heard it in your ears. "Hi."

Lego's eyes widened. The pupils—already dilated behind the lenses, already responding to the alpha scent that was leaking from Tui's skin like heat from pavement—expanded further. His lips parted. The tongue piercing glinted

"Oh," Lego breathed. "Oh. You smell—Tui, you smell—"

"I know."

"You smell like a thunderstorm. You smell like the world is about to end and the last thing you'll ever breathe is rain."

"Can you come inside before I—"

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. Lego was already moving—past him, through the doorway, bags and platforms and trailing pink ribbon—and Tui closed the door behind them, and the lock clicked with the sound of a mechanism that understood what was about to happen in this apartment even if the people involved were still pretending they had a plan.

Lego set the bags on the counter. Turned. Looked at Tui, who was standing with his back against the closed door and his hands at his sides and his chest rising and falling with the controlled, effortful breathing of a man who was using every ounce of his discipline—the discipline of a photographer waiting for the light, of a protector holding the line, of a big brother sending money home—to keep himself from crossing the room in two strides and putting his mouth on every inch of exposed skin.

"You're holding back." Lego said. Not an accusation. An observation—the read of Tui's body language, the interpretation of his posture, the translation of his stillness into the emotional data that Lego processed the way other people processed words.

"I'm—" Tui started.

"You're holding back because you're the ground. And the ground doesn't shake. And if the ground shakes, who holds everyone up?" Lego's voice was steady. Clear. The voice of a person who was not in heat, who was not hormonally compromised, who was standing in this apartment at full capacity—all of his empathy, all of his perception, all of his relentless, sentimental, brave insistence on seeing the people he loved—and choosing to use that capacity to say the thing that Tui could not say himself.

"You're scared," Lego continued, "because you've never let anyone see you lose control. You've seen me lose control. You've held me through it. You've been the mat and the silk and the floor. But you've never been the one falling."

Tui said nothing. His jaw was tight. The heat in his palms was spreading—up his arms, across his chest, down into the low belly where the rut coiled like a held breath, building pressure, building urgency, and the urgency was not just sexual. It was existential. It was the urgency of a man who had spent four years being the strongest person in every room and who was now being told, by his own biology, that strength had a shelf life, and the shelf life had expired, and the only option was to let the weight be held by someone else.

Lego crossed the room.

He didn't rush—Lego, who rushed everything, who texted in avalanches and arrived in fourteen minutes and loved with the velocity of a person terrified that stillness meant abandonment—didn't rush. He walked. Step by step. Platforms on the old hardwood. Each footfall deliberate, measured, the approach of a person who understood, from years of aerial work, that the most important moments were the ones you controlled.

He stopped in front of Tui. Close enough to touch. Close enough that the combined scent—strawberry and storm—was a third presence in the room, a chemical announcement.

Lego reached up. His hands—the black-and-gold nails, the small, strong fingers—cupped Tui's face. The same gesture he'd used on the crash mat, the night the distance closed. The gesture that grounded Tui the way Tui's shoulder grounded Lego's lean.

"Hey," Lego said softly. "It's me."

"I know."

"Do you? Because you're looking at me like I'm something you need to protect from yourself. And I'm not. I'm the thing that catches you." His thumbs stroked Tui's cheekbones. The touch was featherlight and devastating. "You caught me, Tui. Every single time. Every heat, every bad night, every time I showed up at your door because my apartment was too big and my family was too far and the only thing that made the noise stop was the sound of you breathing. You caught me."

Tui's eyes burned. The pressure—not tears, not yet, but the tectonic predecessor to tears, the shifting of plates deep beneath the surface—built behind his sternum with the same relentless, unignorable force as the rut itself.

"Now it's my turn," Lego said. "Let me catch you."

The sound that came out of Tui was not a word.

It was the sound of the ground breaking—a deep, structural vibration that traveled from his chest into the air and into Lego's palms and through Lego's bones and into the floor of an old apartment with a hesitant elevator and a balcony full of rescued herbs. His hands left his sides and found Lego's waist.

The grip was not gentle.

It was not the careful, controlled hold of the previous heats—the patient, supportive, I've-got-you hold that Tui had perfected, the hold of the ground beneath the mat beneath the silk. This grip was different. This grip was the alpha in the rut, the storm behind the rain, the current beneath the tide—and it said mine with a force that bypassed language and went straight into the bone.

His fingers pressed into the silk of the slip dress. Through the fabric, Lego's waist was narrow and warm and alive in a way that made Tui's vision white out for a fraction of a second—a biological reset, the alpha brain rebooting, recalibrating from protector to something less civilized and more honest.

Lego gasped. Not with fear—with recognition. The same recognition that had crossed his face at the restaurant, the night they met: there you are. I've been looking for you.

"There," Lego breathed. "There you are."

Tui kissed him the way a storm hits a coast.

Not slowly. Not gently. Not with the measured, patient, tide-like rhythm that had defined their intimacy until now. This was the other thing—the thing that lived beneath the patience, the thing that the rooftops and the graffiti and the midnight runs were all trying to exhaust: a wildness that Tui kept locked in the darkroom of himself, exposed only in the red-lit privacy of his own company, never developed, never printed, never shown.

The kiss was deep and hard and consuming. His mouth covered Lego's with the full, unmanaged force of a man who had been managing himself for four years and had, in the space of a single afternoon, run out of management. His tongue found Lego's tongue piercing and pressed against it—a point of cool metal in the heat of the kiss—and the sensation sent a jolt through both of them, alpha and omega, storm and sweetness.

Lego's back hit the door. Tui hadn't pushed him—hadn't meant to push him—but the forward momentum of the kiss had carried them both backward, and the door was there, and Lego's spine was against it, and Tui's body was against Lego's, and the

total, flush-contact pressure of chest to chest, hip to hip, thigh to thigh was—

"Oh," Lego moaned into the kiss. Not a word but a sound, the omega sound, the vocalization that came from the body's deepest frequency and that Tui, even in the fog of the approaching rut, registered as good, he likes this, more, give him more. "Tui—"

Tui's hands slid down from Lego's waist to his hips. The slip dress rode up. The silk was thin enough that the heat of Lego's skin burned through it, and the sensation—fabric and skin and the memory of every other time he'd touched this body, every heat, every late night, every morning after—layered over the present moment like a multiple exposure, past and present occupying the same frame.

"Bedroom." Tui said against Lego's mouth. His voice was gravel. Deep and rough and barely controlled, the voice of a man talking through clenched teeth because the alternative was not talking at all, and not talking at all meant surrendering to the part of his brain that wanted to bypass the hallway and the bedroom and every other logistical waypoint and simply take right here, against the door, with the lock pressing into Lego's back and the vintage camera lenses watching from behind their glass.

"No." Lego said.

Tui pulled back. The word hit him like cold water—not sobering, exactly, because the rut was too far advanced for sobriety, but arresting, a full-body pause, the alpha instinct pivoting instantly from desire to caution because no was a word that overrode everything, always, unconditionally.

"No?"

"Not yet." Lego's eyes were enormous—gold and wet and bright with something that was not refusal but intention. He was smiling. The underneath smile. The one that no camera had ever caught. "Sit down first."

"I don't think I can sit down, Sweetheart, I think if I sit down I'm going to—"

"Sit. Down."

The command landed in Tui's chest with a weight that was entirely disproportionate to its volume. It was quiet—Lego's quiet voice, the underneath voice—but it carried the authority of a person who held his own body weight by his hands for a living and who understood, with professional precision, the difference between performing authority and being authoritative. This was the latter. This was Lego, the disciplined aerialist, the person who knew that one inch could be dangerous, taking control of the situation with the same careful, measured confidence he applied to every drop.

Tui sat down.

He sat on the edge of the bed—his bed, the good mattress, the clean sheets that smelled like nothing because he believed spaces should smell like the people in them—and looked up at Lego, who was still standing by the door in the black silk dress and the platform sandals and the dusty pink cardigan that had slipped entirely off one shoulder, revealing the strap and the collarbone and the hickey Tui had left three days ago, fading now to a soft amber shadow on golden skin.

Lego reached for the Gloomy Bear tote. Brought it to the bed. Set it beside Tui with the deliberate care of a person presenting a gift that they'd thought about for longer than they would ever admit.

"Open it."

Tui looked at the bag. Then at Lego. Then at the bag.

He opened it.

Inside, wrapped in tissue paper the color of strawberries, was a blanket. Not a new blanket—a worn one. Soft, heavy cotton in a shade of blue that had faded from washing into something gentler, something that looked like the sky at the moment between afternoon and evening, when the light gave up trying to be bright and settled for being beautiful instead.

It smelled of the sea.

The scent hit Tui like a dropped frame—sudden, total, the image arriving fully developed without the intervening chemistry. Salt. Sand. The particular, mineral warmth of a Thai coast in the afternoon. And underneath, older, fainter, the ghost of a perfume that Tui hadn't smelled in four years—a cheap, sweet, floral perfume that his sister had worn every day of her adult life, the scent that had been on the pink scarf she'd wrapped around his bleeding rib on a boat in Pattaya.

"Lego—"

"I called your mom." Lego's voice was careful. The voice of a person defusing something delicate—not a bomb, but something more dangerous: an emotion. "Last week. I called her and I told her I wanted to send you something that smelled like home. And she—she cried, Tui. She cried on the phone for like three minutes, and then she said she had something, and she sent it."

Tui held the blanket. His hands—the steady hands, the photographer's hands, the hands that had held cameras and film and Lego's body and his own grief in equal measure—were shaking.

"It was on the couch in your parents' house," Lego continued. "Your mom said your sister used to—she said it was—"

"The TV blanket," Tui whispered. "She'd—we'd watch movies on the couch. After the

beach. She'd wrap this around both of us and—"

He couldn't finish.

The grief came up like a tide. Like the Pattaya tide that his sister had taught him to read—not all at once, not as a wave, but as a slow, massive, irresistible rising, the water simply being higher than it had been a moment ago, claiming the sand inch by inch until the shore was underwater and the world was rewritten.

He pressed the blanket to his face and breathed, and the breath came back out as a sound that he had not made since the funeral—a sound that was not crying and not screaming and not any word in any language but was instead the raw, involuntary vocalization of a body that had been holding weight and had been given permission, by a boy in a silk dress with gold-moon nails, to set it down.

Lego sat beside him. Not close enough to crowd. Close enough to be felt.

And then—with the same careful, diagnostic precision with which he leaned against stressed friends until they relaxed—Lego leaned.

His weight arrived the way it always did. Gradually, then all at once. Shoulder, then side, then the full, deliberate press of his body against Tui's arm—the omega leaning into the alpha, the sweetness leaning into the storm, and the storm, for the first time, letting itself be held.

They sat like that for a long time.

The rut pulsed beneath the grief—not competing with it, not overriding it, but coexisting, the way heat and light coexisted in the same fire. The body wanted. The heart ached. Both were true. Both were real. Both were Tui—the whole of him, the protector and the orphaned brother, the photographer and the graffiti artist, the ground and the earthquake.

"Thank you," Tui said eventually. The words were rough, abraded by whatever had passed through his throat. "Sweetheart. Thank you."

"You don't thank me for this."

"I'm thanking you anyway."

"Then I'm telling you to stop. This isn't a gift. This is what people do when they love someone. They pay attention. They call your mom. They bring you the blanket that smells like the person you miss." Lego's hand found Tui's knee. Squeezed. "You taught me that. You taught me that love is not a coat in a box. It's warm milk with honey. It's remembering someone's coffee order. It's being the door that's always open."

Tui set the blanket down. Folded it—carefully, the way you fold something sacred—

and placed it on the pillow. It would stay there. It would stay there for years, the blue fading further with each wash, the sea-scent gradually replaced by the combined scent of rain and strawberry, alpha and omega, the new overlaying the old the way new growth overlaid a graffitied wall: not erasing but incorporating, adding another layer to a palimpsest that was never finished because that was the whole point—nothing was truly trash, nothing was truly gone, everything lived on in the next iteration of itself.

He turned to Lego.

The rut was building again. The grief had not diminished it—had, if anything, intensified it, because the emotional breaking had loosened something structural, removed a load-bearing wall, and the space that opened up was vast and hungry and demanding to be filled. The alpha brain, momentarily quieted by sorrow, surged back with doubled force, and what it wanted—what Tui wanted, the man and the biology inseparable now, fused by the heat and the tears and the blanket that smelled of the sea—was the person sitting beside him. Entirely. Completely. Without reservation or control or the careful, measured patience that had been his armor and his prison for four years.

"Lego."

"Yeah?"

"I need—"

The word stuck. Need. The forbidden word. The system-failure word. The word that meant I am not enough on my own and please don't leave and I've been the ground for so long that I've forgotten I'm also allowed to tremble.

"I know what you need," Lego said. Gently. The gentleness of a person who understood that the hardest thing a protector could ever do was admit they needed protecting. "You don't have to say it. I can smell it."

He could. The rut scent was filling the bedroom now—hot stone and heated mineral and the electric, ozone-sharp charge of a storm about to break. It was mixing with the strawberry and the honey and the ghost of sea salt from the blanket, creating an atmosphere so dense with signal that the air itself felt weighted, pressurized, the room a container for something that was about to overflow.

Lego stood. Stepped in front of Tui. Looked down at him—the alpha sitting on the bed, hands on his knees, jaw tight, eyes burning with the specific, barely contained wildness of a man who was accustomed to controlling everything and was now being controlled by the oldest, most ungovernable force in his body.

Lego reached behind his own neck. Found the zipper of the slip dress. Drew it down.

The sound—the metallic whisper of teeth separating—was the loudest thing in the room. Tui tracked it the way his camera tracked a subject: with total, focused, obsessive attention, every other input falling away until the only thing that existed was the movement of Lego's hand and the slow, deliberate revelation of skin beneath black silk.

The dress fell.

It pooled at Lego's feet—around the platforms, on the old hardwood—and underneath was Lego. Just Lego. No undershirt, no second layer. Just the body: lean and flushed and decorated with its constellation of silver piercings—nipple and navel—and framed by the remaining cardigan, dusty pink, which hung open on his shoulders like a robe, or a curtain, or the last translucent barrier between the audience and the performance.

He was wearing underwear. Black lace. The kind that his sister sent in care packages—expensive, impractical, designed to be seen for exactly the amount of time it took to be removed.

"Lego—"

"Shh." Lego stepped between Tui's knees. His hands went to Tui's shoulders. The nails—black and gold—pressed into the muscle. "Let me. Okay? You held me through three heats. You said slow down and I've got you and eat first and I'm staying. You were the ground. Now let me be the ground."

He pushed Tui's shoulders—gently, firmly, with the confidence of a person who knew exactly how much force a body could absorb—and Tui went. Backward. Onto the mattress. Onto the clean sheets and the sacred blue blanket. Looking up at the ceiling that had a water stain in the shape of a comma, and then not looking at the ceiling because Lego was climbing onto him—straddling his hips, the lace and the cardigan and the bare skin and the piercings, all of it settling into Tui's lap with the sure, practiced grace of a body that knew this body, that had mapped this body, that had memorized this body the way Tui memorized the angles of a perfect shot.

Lego's hands went to Tui's shirt. He pulled it up and over—not asking, not waiting, not requesting permission because the permission had been given months ago, in a darkroom, in a whisper: change them—and then Tui was shirtless beneath him, and Lego's palms were on his chest, flat and warm, reading the heartbeat, the breathing, the heat.

"Your heart's going crazy," Lego said. Not with concern—with wonder. The wonder of a person touching something powerful and not being afraid of it. "It's so fast, Tui."

"That's—" you, Tui wanted to say, but the word was swallowed by the feeling of Lego's hips shifting against his—a slow, deliberate roll, the same undulating motion he'd used during his own heat, the omega rhythm, but deployed now with a

different intention: not receiving but giving, not seeking but offering, the body saying here, take from me, I have enough, I am enough, let me be enough.

The rut responded.

Tui's hands found Lego's hips—the lace waistband, the warm skin above it—and gripped. The grip was hard. Harder than he'd ever gripped before, harder than the careful, controlled, protector's hold, and Lego—Lego, who could hold his own body weight by his hands, who practiced drops from fifteen feet, who understood the difference between dangerous force and desired force better than anyone—didn't flinch. Didn't gasp. Didn't say too much or be careful or any of the things that a less physical, less brave, less Lego person might have said.

He moaned.

Low and sweet and encouraging. The moan of a person being held exactly the way they wanted to be held. The vocal evidence that the grip was not too hard—was, in fact, exactly hard enough.

"Yes," Lego whispered. "Like that. Hold me like that."

Tui sat up. The movement was fast—rut-fast, alpha-fast, the speed of a body that had stopped asking permission from the mind and was simply doing—and suddenly Lego was in his arms, in his lap, wrapped around him, and their mouths found each other, and the kiss was the continuation of the kiss by the door but deeper, wetter, more desperate, Tui's tongue against the metal ball of Lego's piercing, Lego's fingers in Tui's hair, and the sounds they were making—growls and whimpers and the shapeless vowels of two people who had abandoned language for something more efficient—filled the bedroom and spilled out through the open balcony door and into the Bangkok night, where the basil and the lemongrass and the mint absorbed them without comment, because plants were indifferent to human desperation and this was a mercy.

"Cardigan," Tui managed. "Off."

"You take it off."

He did. His hands slid the dusty pink fabric off Lego's shoulders—down his arms, past his elbows, off his wrists—and it dropped behind them on the bed, and Lego was in nothing but the black lace and the piercings and the platform sandals that he hadn't taken off, and the sight of him—the full, complete, unfiltered sight—hit Tui's rut brain like a floodlight hitting film: an overexposure, a whiteout, a moment of total, obliterating brightness followed by the slow, aching return of detail.

The earrings first—silver, catching the lamplight. The hair, still up, but loosening, strands escaping the chopsticks and the ribbon, falling around his face. The neck, the gland, the epicenter of the strawberry scent, flushed pink and calling. The

collarbones. The nipple piercing. The stomach—taut, trembling, the muscles of a professional acrobat, The navel piercing. The lace, black against flushed skin, and beneath the lace, the visible evidence that Lego was hard—had been hard since he walked in the door, probably since the moment his omega brain registered that his alpha was in rut and the response was instantaneous, total, biological.

"You're beautiful," Tui said. Not the word he'd used before. The same word. But it landed differently through the rut voice—lower, rougher, saturated with a possessiveness that Tui normally kept under lock and key. Beautiful. Not a compliment but a fact, stated with the authority of a man who had spent his adult life studying the visual world and who was now looking at the most compelling subject he had ever encountered and understanding, with full, devastating clarity, that no photograph would ever capture this. That this was a moment that could only be lived—not developed, not printed, not framed.

"Then have me," Lego said. "Tui. Stop looking. Have me."

The rut answered.

Tui flipped them.

The movement was fluid and absolute—one instant Lego was in his lap, the next Lego was on his back on the mattress, his hair fanning across it in black-on-faded-blue, a contrast so beautiful that even the rut-addled alpha brain paused for a fraction of a second to register it before the fraction ended and the brain returned to its single, consuming imperative.

Lego's legs opened. His arms pulled Tui down. The black lace pressed against Tui's stomach as their bodies aligned—chest to chest, hip to hip, the same geometry, the same physics, but inverted, reversed, Tui on top and Lego beneath and the weight that Tui had always held for others now being held by someone else, the gravity of his body absorbed by the mattress and the blanket and the person underneath him who was saying yes and please and don't hold back and I can take it, I was built to take it, I hold myself in the air for a living, you think I can't hold you?

"I don't want to ruin—" Tui said.

"Ruin it. I don't care."

The sound of lace tearing was obscene and gorgeous—a small, sharp rip that destroyed twenty euros' worth of Italian craftsmanship and replaced it with access, with skin, with the sight and scent and reality of Lego fully naked beneath him, wet and ready in the way that only an omega bonded to their alpha was ready: completely, cellularly, the body having made its preparations hours before the mind caught up.

The slick was everywhere—on Lego's inner thighs, on the sheets, glistening in the

lamplight with a quality that was not clinical but lush, the body's welcome, the biological equivalent of an unlocked door.

"Inside," Lego panted. His heels hooked behind Tui's thighs—the strong, silk-trained legs, pulling with a force that admitted no argument. "Now. Tui. Now. Stop being patient. Stop being the ground. Be the storm. Be what you actually are when you're not holding it together for everyone else."

Tui entered him in one stroke.

The sound Lego made was a scream.

Not a horror-movie scream—not pain, not fear. A release scream. The sound of a body receiving exactly what it wanted at exactly the depth and speed and intensity it wanted, and being so overwhelmed by the receiving that the only available response was to open the throat and let the sound out. It was the vocal equivalent of a silk drop: the freefall, the surrender, the moment of absolute trust in the catch.

Tui groaned—deep, alpha-deep, from the bottom of his chest, a sound that vibrated through both their bodies and into the mattress and into the floor and into the old building's bones. His hands were on either side of Lego's head, braced against the mattress, holding himself up even as every instinct told him to collapse, to press, to crush his full weight against the small, strong, impossibly brave body beneath him.

"Move," Lego begged. "Move move move—"

Tui moved.

They were animals.

That was the truth of it—the honest, un-novelistic, un-romanticized truth. They were animals in the way that all living things were animals when the veneer of civilization was stripped away by biology: present, urgent, focused on the single imperative of the body, which was connection, which was friction, which was the rhythmic, relentless, beautiful collision of two people who had spent months learning each other in the language of care and were now translating that care into the language of rut, which was rougher and louder and less polite and exactly as loving, because love did not require softness. Love required honesty. And this—the sweat and the sound and the grip and the slick and the animal, unashamed need—was the most honest they had ever been.

Tui fucked him the way a storm hit a coast: in waves, in surges, with intervals of eerie calm between the crests that were somehow more intense than the crests themselves. Fast, then slow. Deep, then shallow. A rhythm that was not calculated but felt—guided by the same tidal instinct that had guided Tui through every

important moment of his life, the instinct that said pay attention, read the light, follow the subject.

The subject was Lego.

Lego, who was loud. Not self-consciously loud—not the performative moaning of a person putting on a show—but constitutionally loud, vocally uninhibited, a person whose body processed pleasure through sound the way Tui's processed it through grip. Every thrust produced a response: a gasp, a moan, a word, a fragment of a word, Tui's name broken into syllables and scattered across the sheets like dropped letters.

"—oh God—yes—there—Tui—harder—"

"Like this?"

"like—oh—don't stop—please don't—"

Tui didn't stop.

The first round ended with Lego's legs locked around Tui's waist and Tui's face buried in the omega's neck, teeth against the gland—not biting, not claiming in the permanent, irreversible sense—but pressing, holding, the alpha's instinctive response to orgasm: mine, stay, don't move, let me keep you here, let me keep you. The knot swelled, and Lego cried out—the sharp, bitten sound of a body stretching to accommodate, followed by the long, shuddering exhale of a body that had been filled completely and was experiencing the specific, full-body relief of the lock: the biological reassurance that the alpha was staying, was committed, was not going anywhere.

"Fuck," Lego whispered into Tui's hair. He was trembling. His entire body, from the platform-calloused feet to the fingers knotted in Tui's hair, was vibrating with the aftershock frequency of a completed circuit. "Fuck. Tui."

"Mm."

"That was—you were—" A breath. A laugh. The slightly delirious laugh of a person who had been hit by a wave and surfaced gasping and grinning. "You've been hiding that."

"I haven't—"

"You have. You've been patient and sweet and measured and the whole time you had that in you? The whole time?" His hand found Tui's jaw. Lifted it. Made Tui look at him—made the storm look at the person it had just crashed against and see, reflected in gold lenses, not damage but delight. "I'm furious at you. How dare you make me wait months for that."

"I didn't want to—"

"Scare me? Hurt me? Be too much?" Lego's voice softened. The delirious edge faded into something quieter, steadier, the underneath voice making an appearance through the postcoital haze. "Tui. Do you know who you're talking to? I'm the person who hangs upside down from the ceiling by one leg. I'm the person who has piercings in places that make Nut wince. You cannot be too much for me. That is physically, logistically, spiritually impossible."

The knot released. Tui shifted—pulled back, pulled out, and the loss of connection produced a small, wounded sound from Lego that was immediately compensated for by Lego's hands, which grabbed Tui's arms and pulled him back down, into the space beside him, into the warmth and the wet and the strawberry-and-storm atmosphere that they had created together.

"Again?" Lego asked.

"I—" Tui breathed. His body was already responding—the rut cycling, rebuilding, the refractory period abbreviated by biology to something almost nonexistent. "You need water. You need—"

"I need you. Water later. You now."

"Sweetheart—"

"Don't Sweetheart me, Handsome, I can feel you getting hard again against my leg and I'm not letting you waste it on being responsible."

Tui laughed. The real laugh. The one from the belly, the one that was made of the same material as grief and joy and the bass through Pattaya sand—deep, vibrating, traveling through the mattress into Lego's body, making the omega grin with the particular, savage satisfaction of a person who had made their alpha laugh during a rut and considered this a personal victory on par with a flawless aerial routine.

"You're impossible." Tui said.

"I'm yours. Same thing."

The second round was Lego's.

He pushed Tui onto his back—used the core strength, the aerial discipline, the trained, professional-grade muscle control of a body that conversed with gravity daily—and climbed onto him. Straddled him. The platforms were gone now—kicked off during round one, probably under the bed, probably next to the spray paint cans that Lego pretended not to know about and absolutely knew about—and Lego's bare feet pressed into the mattress on either side of Tui's hips as he rose up on his knees and positioned himself and sank down with the slow, controlled, devastating precision of an aerial descent.

The sound Tui made was not human.

It was alpha. Pure, unprocessed, undiluted alpha—a growl that started in his chest and traveled outward in concentric circles, filling the room, filling the building, probably reaching the basil on the balcony and the herbs in their rescued containers and the city beyond, which absorbed it the way cities absorbed everything: without comment, without judgment, just absorbing, because Bangkok was a city that had heard every sound a body could make and kept them all.

Lego rode him.

His hips rolled in the figure-eight pattern that his silks training had hard-wired into his muscle memory: fluid, continuous, with the particular, hypnotic quality of a body that knew exactly how to move in space and was now demonstrating that knowledge for an audience of one. His hands braced on Tui's chest. His hair—the ribbon lost somewhere in the sheets—fell around both of them like a black silk tent, creating a private space, a darkroom, a developing chamber where the image of two people finding each other could emerge slowly, in its own time, in its own red-lit, chemical-scented truth.

"Look at me," Lego breathed. Commanding. The discipline in his voice was the aerial discipline—focused, precise, the voice of a person who knew that attention was the difference between a drop and a fall. "Tui. Look at me. Stay with me. Don't go inside yourself. Stay here."

Tui looked.

He looked at Lego above him—flushed and sweating and moving and alive—and he stayed. He didn't retreat into observation. He didn't catalog the details for later processing. He didn't file the image in the cabinet behind his ribs where he kept the things that were too real to experience in real time. He stayed in the real time. He stayed in the body. He stayed in the moment, which was messy and loud and wet and imperfect and more beautiful than any photograph he had ever taken, because photographs were about moments, and this—this was the moment itself, unmediated, undeveloped, unpreserved.

Just lived.

Tui's hands found Lego's hips. Gripped. Pulled him down—hard—and thrust up to meet him, and the impact drew a sound from both of them that was the same sound, the same frequency, alpha and omega harmonizing in the particular, full-body chord that only happened when two people were so completely matched that their biology couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

"I love you," Tui said. The rut voice. Deep and wrecked and completely honest. "I love you and I don't know how to need things and you're the first person who ever made me want to learn."

Lego's rhythm stuttered. His eyes—those gold, impossible eyes—filled. Not with tears of sadness but with the kind of tears that came from being seen—truly, completely, by a person who had spent their whole life looking at the world through viewfinders and had finally, in the middle of a rut, put the camera down and looked with naked eyes and said I see you too.

"Again," Lego whispered. "Say it again."

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you. I love your hair and your nails and your piercings and the way you keep everything. I love that you called my mother. I love that you brought the blanket. I love that you're wearing a silk dress to my apartment in an old building with a hesitant elevator because you don't know how to do anything halfway and I never want you to learn."

Lego was crying. Crying and riding him and laughing and gripping his chest and the tears were falling onto Tui's skin, warm and wet.

The second orgasm broke through them simultaneously—a shared event, a double exposure, two bodies experiencing the same force at the same moment and expressing it in the same involuntary, full-volume, unperformable sound: Lego's cry high and cresting, Tui's groan deep and foundational, the two frequencies combining into a harmony that was less music than geology—the sound of two tectonic plates finding alignment after years of silent, grinding, underground negotiation.

The knot. The lock. The hold.

Lego collapsed forward onto Tui's chest. Hair everywhere—on Tui's face, in his mouth, across his eyes—and Tui didn't brush it away. He let it cover him. He let Lego cover him. He let the weight and the warmth and the sweet, strawberry-and-salt scent of an omega who had just cried and come and laughed all at the same time settle over him.

"Tui?"

"Sweetheart."

"Are you okay?"

A question that no one asked Tui. A question that Tui didn't know how to answer because it had never been directed at him—it was always directed by him, at others, the caretaker's diagnostic, the protector's check-in. To be asked it—to have it turned around and aimed at his own chest like a flashlight into a dark room—was

so unfamiliar that it took him three full breaths to formulate a response.

"I don't know," he said. And the honesty of it—the raw, unprecedented, un-Tui-like honesty—made his throat close and his eyes burn and his arms tighten around the body on top of him.

"That's okay," Lego said. Soft. So soft. The voice of a person who understood that I don't know was, for someone who always knew, the bravest possible answer. "That's okay, Tui. You don't have to know. You just have to be here. I'll know for both of us."

A silence.

The rut was still running—a third wave building, slower than the first two, deeper, with the heavy, inevitable quality of a tide that had been out for a long time and was finally, irrevocably, coming in.

"Again?" Lego murmured against his chest.

"You must be—"

"I'm not tired. I'm omega'd out of my mind for you and your scent is making me insane and if you think I'm going to lie here on top of you while your knot goes down and not ask for more, you have fundamentally misunderstood the person you're in love with."

"Lego—"

"Again. Tui. I'm not asking. I'm telling."

Tui's laugh was wet—wrecked with tears and rut and the particular, healing exhaustion of a person who had finally let the weight down and discovered that the world didn't end when the ground shook. The world just shifted. And in the shifted world, there was space for things that the old configuration hadn't permitted: need, and asking, and the terrifying, liberating act of being held by someone smaller than you who was, in every way that mattered, strong enough to carry you.

"Okay," he said. "Again."

"And after that?"

"Again."

"And after that?"

"Sweetheart. As many times as you want. Every single time. Until the rut's done and after the rut's done and tomorrow morning and the morning after that and—"

"—every morning after that," Lego finished, grinning into his chest, the words

vibrating against his skin like bass through sand. "I know. I remember. I keep things."

"I know you do."

"I'm keeping this."

"I know."

"I'm keeping you."

"I know, Sweetheart. I know."

The third round was in the shower.

Not because they planned it—they'd gone to the shower because Lego had insisted on water and Tui had insisted on hydration and they'd compromised on both at once: the ancient showerhead sputtering warm water over two bodies that were heat-flushed and slick-covered and trembling with the specific, joyful exhaustion of people who had done this twice and were about to do it again because the rut said so and the omega said so and the bodies, frankly, were no longer accepting input from the rational mind.

Lego's back was against the tile. His legs were around Tui's waist. His arms were around Tui's neck. Water ran down both of them, turning hair into rivers and skin into something luminous, and the sound of the shower mixed with the sounds they were making—Lego's continuous, breathy, escalating commentary (yes—there—don't—don't stop—harder—God—THERE—) and Tui's deep, rut-wrecked responses (I've got you—I know—I know, Sweetheart—) creating a duet that the old building's pipes absorbed and transmitted through the walls, probably, into the adjacent apartments, where the neighbors were either asleep or politely pretending to be.

The fourth was back on the bed. Slow. So slow it was almost cruel—Tui behind Lego again, spooned together, and the gentleness of this round after the ferocity of the first three was the most overwhelming thing of all, because it proved what Lego had been trying to show him all night: that the storm and the patience were not opposites. They were the same weather system, seen from different distances. The storm was what it looked like from the outside. The patience was what it felt like from the inside. And inside, always, was where Lego was.

The rut lasted two more days.

They left the bedroom for water and food and one memorable incident in which Lego, delirious with pheromones and post-orgasmic giddiness, attempted to make congee in Tui's kitchen and accidentally set off the smoke alarm, which triggered a visit from the building's elderly security guard, who took one look at Lego—standing

in the kitchen in Tui's stolen gray hoodie and nothing else, hair disheveled, neck covered in marks, holding a smoking pot with the expression of a person who had committed a war crime against rice—and simply said, "Ah. I see," and left.

Lego laughed about it for forty minutes. Tui laughed about it for forty-one.

Between the waves, they talked. Not about important things—They talked about nothing. About everything. About the security guard's face and the taste of the burned congee and whether Gloomy Bear would be an alpha or omega and how many spray paint cans Tui had under the bed and what they would name a cat if they got one.

They talked—breathlessly, endlessly, circling back to the same topics, discovering new corners in conversations they'd had before, marveling at the inexhaustible novelty of a person they already knew by heart. And between the talking, they touched—constantly, compulsively, Lego's hand on Tui's arm, Tui's fingers in Lego's hair, the casual, continuous contact of two people whose bodies had decided that separation was no longer an option and had adjusted their default settings accordingly.

On the third morning, Tui woke up and the rut was over.

He knew because the heat was gone—the hands, the skull, the low-belly fire—all of it extinguished, replaced by a clarity so profound it was almost disorienting. As if someone had cleaned the lens. The world was the same world, but the focus was sharper, the aperture wider, the depth of field extending all the way to the horizon.

Lego was asleep beside him.

Curled on his side, face half-hidden by hair, one hand tucked under the pillow and the other resting on Tui's chest, directly over the heart—the omega's instinctive sleep position, maintaining contact with the alpha's heartbeat even in unconsciousness, the body keeping watch while the mind rested. The navel piercing caught the early light. The marks on his neck and his hips and his thighs were a map of the past three days—a record, a proof, the physical evidence of a rut that had been, for the first time in Tui's life, not endured alone.

Tui reached for his phone.

The screen showed twelve hours of accumulated messages—the group chat, mostly, which had been conducting a lively and entirely unsupervised conversation in his absence:

Hong: Has anyone heard from Tui? He hasn't responded in two days.

Est: He's fine.

Hong: How do you know?

Est: Because Lego hasn't responded in two days either.

Hong: ...

Hong: ah.

Nut: Let them be, love. They're fine.

Hong: I know they're fine I just want them to ANSWER THEIR PHONES like ADULTS

Est: Hong.

Hong: What.

Est: You texted me at 3am last week asking if I thought your peony tattoo needed a touch-up.

Hong: THAT'S DIFFERENT

Nut: It's really not, baby.

Hong: I hate all of you.

Hong: Tell Lego I miss him.

Hong: DON'T TELL HIM I SAID THAT.

Tui smiled. Set the phone down. Looked at Lego, who was still sleeping, who would sleep for another hour at least, who would wake up and demand food and water and possibly a third attempt at congee and definitely more kisses and absolutely, without question, again, because Lego's appetite for everything—for contact, for love, for proof—was bottomless and Tui's willingness to provide was infinite, and between bottomless and infinite there was more than enough space for a lifetime.

He got out of bed. Walked to the balcony. Stood in the warm Bangkok morning beside the basil growing out of the boot and the mint growing out of the tin can and the lemongrass growing out of the cracked pot sealed with determination. The city was awake. The city was always awake. And it was full—full of rusted gates and cracked sidewalks and overlooked corners and stray dogs sleeping in patches of sunlight and jasmine garlands sold at traffic lights and people, everywhere, going about the daily, unglamorous, extraordinary business of being alive.

Tui picked up his phone. He pointed it at the balcony—at the herbs, the rescued containers, the Bangkok skyline behind them.

Then he turned it around. Aimed it through the balcony door. Into the bedroom. At the bed.

Lego was there. Asleep. Tangled in sheets and hair and the blue blanket, one arm

extended into the space where Tui had been, the fingers curled around the absence, holding the empty air with the grip of a person who kept everything, even the things that weren't there.

Tui took the photo.

It was imperfect. The light was too bright. The angle was off. Lego's face was half-obscured. The composition violated every rule that Tui had spent four years learning—the rule of thirds, the golden ratio, the careful, disciplined architecture of a well-made image.

But it was true.

It was true the way the basil was true—growing where it shouldn't, in a container that wasn't meant for it, refusing to die, refusing to be anything other than exactly, impossibly, stubbornly alive.

He saved it. Filed it in the folder. The secret folder. The one with 5,000 photos of his nephews and the street portraits and the midnight graffiti and, now, this: a sleeping omega in a wrecked bed, holding the space where an alpha used to be, trusting—even in sleep, even in the vulnerable, defenseless honesty of unconsciousness—that the absence was temporary and the return was guaranteed.

Photo number 5,001.

The most important one yet.

Later, when the household had recovered, when the sheets were washed and the congee was finally made correctly and the building's security guard had been offered an apologetic plate of cookies, Lego found the photo on Tui's phone.

He didn't ask permission. He never did.

He airdropped it to himself.

Strawberry cake

—"Your skin is warm like an oven

Your kiss is sugary sweet

Your fingers feel like cotton

When you put your arms around me."

Melanie Martinez - Cake

The cake was an experiment.

This needed to be understood, because Tui did not experiment. Tui prepared. Tui researched and measured and followed the sequence with the same methodical patience he brought to developing film and recycling furniture and navigating the emotional architecture of a group of six men who were, collectively, the most complicated structure he'd ever built. Tui did not wing things. Tui did not improvise. Tui had once spent forty-five minutes sanding a shipping crate before deciding it was ready to be a coffee table, because rushing the grain meant disrespecting the wood, and disrespecting the wood meant the table would be uneven, and an uneven table meant the coffee would tilt, and tilted coffee was—

The point was: Tui did not experiment.

But Tui was baking a cake.

He was baking a cake because Lego had said—three days ago, on the couch, at midnight, curled into the comma-shape that was his default position in Tui's apartment, his hair spilling over the arm of the sofa and his platform boots discarded by the door and his voice doing the underneath thing, the quiet thing, the thing that meant the words coming out were not performance but person —"Nobody's ever baked me a cake."

He'd said it casually. The way Lego said all the devastating things: lightly, between other sentences, tucked into the middle of a paragraph about nail art or a brand collaboration or the new aerial routine he was choreographing, as if the devastation were a comma and not a full stop. Nobody's ever baked me a cake. Not bought him a cake—people had bought him cakes. His parents had bought him cakes. His sister had shipped him a cake for his twentieth birthday, and it had arrived in a box lined with tissue paper and accompanied by a note that said Happy Birthday, baby! with a heart emoji, and the cake had been architecturally flawless and emotionally vacant, the buttercream equivalent of a coat in a box: expensive, beautiful, and fundamentally a substitute for showing up.

Nobody had baked him one. Nobody had stood in a kitchen and measured flour and cracked eggs and made a mess and produced something imperfect and specific and made-by-hand, the way Tui's mother made khanom for the triplets on their birthday —three small, lopsided cakes, one for each boy, decorated with whatever they'd requested that year (dinosaurs, trucks, the color blue), each one a little different because handmade things were a little different, because that was the point, because the imperfection was the love.

So Tui was baking a cake.

He was baking it in Lego's kitchen, because Lego's kitchen was better equipped—newer, larger, with a convection oven that Tui suspected had never been used for its

intended purpose and a marble countertop that had, until today, served primarily as a surface for Lego's takeout containers and his elaborate nail-art supply chain. Tui had arrived at 2:00 PM with a paper bag from the specialty grocery store—flour, sugar, butter, vanilla extract, a carton of heavy cream, and two pints of strawberries that he'd selected individually, turning each one in his fingers, assessing the color and the firmness with the same critical eye he used to evaluate the grain on a reclaimed piece of wood. The strawberries needed to be perfect. Not because Tui was a perfectionist—he wasn't, not in the way Est was a perfectionist, with the clinical, gallery-like precision of a man who arranged perfumes by mood. Tui's standard was different. Tui's standard was worthy. The strawberries needed to be worthy of the person they were for.

The cake was a simple sponge—vanilla. He'd followed a recipe from a food blog that he'd bookmarked three days ago and read seven times with the focused, systematic attention of a man memorizing the instructions for a device he'd never operated. He'd measured the flour. Sifted it. Measured it again, because the blog had said precision matters in baking and Tui, who was not precise by nature but who could become precise when the stakes were high enough, had taken this instruction as a personal directive. He'd creamed the butter and sugar with a whisk—by hand, because Lego owned a stand mixer but Tui had looked at it, looked at the whisk, and chosen the whisk, because handmade meant hand-made, and a cake mixed by a machine was just a cake, but a cake mixed by a person's actual hands was a letter.

The sponge had gone into the oven golden and promising. It had come out forty minutes later slightly domed, slightly cracked along the top, slightly imperfect in the way that all first attempts were slightly imperfect—and Tui had looked at it and felt, absurdly, irrationally, the way he felt when a photograph turned out: the quiet, private pride of a person who had made something real appear where nothing had been.

The cake was now in the refrigerator, cooling. Level one on the wire rack, wrapped in a clean kitchen towel, settling into the cool air with the patient, unhurried obedience of a thing that understood it was not yet finished—that the best part, the cream and the fruit, was still to come.

Tui stood at the counter. The marble was dusted with a fine layer of flour—on the surface, on his hands, on the front of the black t-shirt he'd worn because he'd anticipated mess and black hid mess, except black did not hide flour, and the flour had gotten everywhere, in the way that flour always got everywhere, because flour was, in Tui's experience, the most anarchic substance in the culinary world: quiet, white, seemingly docile, and absolutely impossible to contain.

The heavy cream was in a metal bowl. Cold. He'd kept it in the freezer for fifteen minutes, as the blog had instructed—cold cream whips better; warm cream stays liquid and sad—and now it sat on the counter, waiting, while Tui assembled the rest

of the mise en place with the focused, deliberate energy of a man building something important:

The strawberries, washed, stems removed, sliced into thin, precise fans. Each slice laid on a cutting board in a row, red and wet and smelling of—

Strawberries.

The scent hit him. Not the way the rut-scent hit—not the biological, brainstem, tunnel-vision hit—but the quieter, more insidious way that associated scent hit: the way a song heard in a taxi could transport you to a different year, the way the smell of salt air could put you back on a Pattaya shore at 7:00 AM with your sister's music in the sand and the bass in your chest. The strawberries smelled like Lego. Not exactly like Lego—not the Baccarat Rouge, not the shower gel, not the honey-sweet omega baseline—but adjacent. Close enough that Tui's brain, which was always making connections, always layering images, always composing the world into frames that revealed the relationship between things, made the link instantly and involuntarily: strawberry → Lego → sweetness → mouth → skin → want.

He set the knife down. Picked it up. Set it down again.

Focus. Cream. Fruit. Cake. You're baking a cake. You're a twenty-two-year-old man who recycles furniture and photographs the city and sends money to triplets in Pattaya. You can whip cream without having a crisis.

He picked up the whisk.

And then Lego arrived.

Not arrived—materialized.

The way Lego always materialized: suddenly, completely, as if he'd been assembled from component parts in the hallway and had simply walked through the door fully formed, fully costumed, fully Lego, the gravitational center of any room he entered shifting immediately to accommodate his presence.

He must have been in the bedroom. Or the bathroom—He'd been quiet for the past hour—suspiciously quiet, the kind of quiet that Lego achieved only when he was deeply focused on something aesthetic, the tongue slightly out, the brow slightly furrowed, the entire being devoted to the application of liner or the selection of accessories or the specific, private alchemy of becoming the version of himself that he wanted the world to see.

The version that walked into the kitchen was—

Tui's hand stopped mid-whisk.

Lego was wearing a slip.—White. Ivory, technically—the warm, slightly golden shade

of white that looked like cream, like milk, like the inside of a shell. It was short—mid-thigh—and the fabric was so thin it was less a garment and more a suggestion, the kind of transparency that existed in the liminal space between wearing something and wearing nothing, where the shadow of the body beneath was visible through the fabric the way a developing image was visible through the chemical solution in a darkroom: present, emergent, not quite real but too real to ignore.

The straps were ribbons. Actual ribbons—thin, satin, tied in small bows at each shoulder, the kind of structural decision that was less fashion and more gift wrapping. A panel of lace ran across the neckline—not the heavy, architectural lace of a bridal gown, but something finer, more fragile, the kind of lace that was made to be seen through, that existed not to cover but to frame, the way a window frame didn't hide the view but made you notice it.

Beneath the ivory transparency: skin. Lego's skin—flushed, moisturized, catching the afternoon light from the kitchen windows with the soft, luminous quality of a surface that had been cared for, tended, maintained with the religious devotion of a person whose skincare routine was a form of self-love and whose body was the canvas for every piercing and every performance and every deliberate, disciplined act of beauty he'd ever committed.

The nipple piercings were visible through the fabric. Two small points of silver, catching light. Present. Announced.

His hair was down. All of it. A waterfall of black that reached past his waist and moved when he breathed—moved when the air moved—shifting and swaying with the indolent, liquid grace of something that was not hair but a substance unto itself, a living accessory that made its own decisions about where to fall and how to catch the light and whose shoulder to brush. It was held back from his face by a single accessory: a thin, ivory ribbon tied as a headband, the ends trailing down the back of his head, mixing with the hair, indistinguishable except by texture—satin against silk, ribbon against strand.

His feet were bare. His toenails were painted. Ivory. Matching the slip.

And the scent—

God, the scent.

The Baccarat Rouge was there—the baseline, the signature, the sweet-chemical-strawberry that was so completely identified with Lego that smelling it on anyone else would feel like theft. But it was layered today. Deliberately layered. Beneath the Baccarat Rouge: something warmer. Vanilla—real vanilla, not synthetic, the kind that smelled of brown sugar and heat and the inside of a bakery on a winter afternoon. And beneath the vanilla: the omega baseline. The honey. The warmth. The particular, biologically generated sweetness that Lego's body produced as a

resting state and that intensified when he was relaxed, when he was safe, when he was near his alpha—the scent that said I am home and I am happy and I am not performing and this is what I actually smell like when I stop trying.

He smelled like the cake.

He smelled like the strawberries.

He smelled like everything Tui was trying to make, except better, except alive, except walking across the kitchen floor on bare painted feet with the unhurried, unselfconscious gait of a person who knew exactly what they looked like and exactly what effect it would have and was choosing, deliberately, to deploy it.

"Hi." Lego said.

Tui was holding the whisk. The whisk was in the bowl of cold cream. The cream was not being whipped. The cream was sitting there, liquid and untouched, in a state of patient, dairy-based anticipation, waiting for the whisk to move, and the whisk was not moving because Tui's hand was not moving because Tui's brain was not moving. Tui's brain had encountered an input that exceeded its processing capacity—the visual input of Lego in the ivory slip, plus the olfactory input of strawberry-vanilla-honey, plus the tactile memory of every time those ribbons had been untied by his hands—and had simply stalled, like a camera trying to autofocus on something too close, the lens hunting back and forth between clarity and blur without ever settling.

"Hi." Tui said. His voice was even. Steady. The voice of a man who was in complete control and was definitely not having a full sensory crisis over a slip.

Lego crossed the kitchen. His feet made soft sounds on the tile—the particular, quiet pat pat pat of bare skin on cool stone, a domestic percussion that shouldn't have been erotic but was, in the same way that everything Lego did shouldn't have been erotic but was: by virtue of being him, by virtue of existing in a body that had been decorated and pierced and trained and offered up with such consistent, relentless generosity that even the act of walking across a kitchen became an invitation.

He stopped behind Tui.

Pressed against his back.

The full-body press. The Lego signature: not a half-measure, not a tentative testing-the-waters lean, but the complete, committed, total-contact press of a person who communicated through surface area and who believed, with the conviction of a lifetime of evidence, that the amount of body touching another body was directly proportional to the amount of love being transmitted. His chest against Tui's back. The slip's transparency eliminated by contact—the fabric compressed to nothing

between their bodies, so that what Tui felt was not ivory silk but Lego: the warmth of his chest, the hard points of the nipple piercings pressing into Tui's shoulder blades through the flour-dusted t-shirt, the flatness of his stomach against Tui's lower back.

His arms went around Tui's waist. The hands—today's nails were ivory, matching everything, small glossy shells on small strong fingers—clasped at Tui's front, just above his belt line. The grip was light but certain. The grip of a person who had found the surface they wanted to hold and was not interested in discussing alternatives.

His chin found Tui's shoulder. Rested there. The hair—the impossible, endless, world-unto-itself hair—cascaded over Tui's arm, onto the counter, into the mise en place, a strand brushing the edge of the cutting board where the sliced strawberries lay in their precise, patient row.

"You're baking." Lego said. The word came out with the particular, wondering intonation of a person observing a phenomenon they had heard about but never witnessed in nature—the way someone might say you're flying or you're walking on water.

"I'm baking."

"You have flour on your face."

"I have flour everywhere."

"It's cute." Lego's chin pressed deeper into Tui's shoulder. His breath was warm against Tui's neck—warm and strawberry-vanilla-scented and close enough that Tui could feel each exhale individually, each one a small, warm pulse against the skin below his ear, dangerously close to the spot that the alpha brain flagged as gland-adjacent, the spot where scent lived and sensitivity concentrated and rational thought went to die.

"What kind of cake?"

"Vanilla sponge. Strawberry cream."

"For me?"

"For you."

"Tui." The way he said the name—soft, round, filled with air, the T barely touching the roof of the mouth before releasing into the vowel—was not how you said a name. It was how you said a prayer. "You're baking me a cake."

"Trying to. If you let me whip this cream."

"I'm not stopping you."

"You're draped on me like a curtain."

"I'm supervising."

Tui looked down at his hands. The right hand held the whisk. The left hand held the edge of the bowl. Between his arms and the counter, Lego's clasped hands rested against his stomach, the ivory nails a row of small, polished moons against the black fabric of his t-shirt. The contrast was—compositional. A photograph. Light and dark. Small and large. Decorated and plain.

He should have started whipping. He should have moved the whisk in the cream and produced the stiff peaks that the recipe required and assembled the cake and presented it to Lego with the quiet, proud satisfaction of a man who had made something real appear where nothing had been. That was the plan. The plan was cake.

But Lego was breathing on his neck.

And Lego was pressed against his back, the slip's fabric so thin that the heat of his body passed through it without resistance, a thermal transmission that Tui's skin received and cataloged and forwarded directly to the part of his brain that was not interested in cake, that was not interested in cream, that was not interested in anything except the specific, urgent, narrowing question of what would happen if he put the whisk down and turned around and picked Lego up and set him on the counter and untied the ribbon bows at his shoulders one at a time and let the ivory fabric fall and—

He whipped the cream.

The whisk moved. The cream resisted—thick, cold, the initial reluctance of a liquid being asked to become a solid—and then yielded, softening, aerating, the white surface beginning to shift from flat to textured as the air entered and the structure built. Tui focused on it. Used it the way he used his camera: as a tool for redirection, for channeling the energy that was building in his chest into the controlled, mechanical motion of his wrist.

Lego hummed.

The hum vibrated through his chest—through the slip, through the nothing-distance between their bodies—and into Tui's back. A low, continuous, contented frequency. The omega hum. Not the bedroom hum—not the specific, post-orgasmic, I-am-being-tended-to hum of the bathtub. This was the kitchen hum. The domestic hum. The hum of a person who was warm and fed and pressed against the body they loved most in the world and who had nothing to do and nowhere to be and was choosing, with the luxurious, wasteful, decadent freedom of a person who had

grown up in a mansion of purchased affection and had finally found the real thing, to simply be here. Against this back. In this kitchen. Humming.

"Your shoulders are tense," Lego observed. His hands unclasped from Tui's waist and traveled upward—slowly, fingertips first, the ivory nails tracing lines up Tui's sides through the t-shirt, over his ribs, finding the muscles of his upper back and pressing in with the focused, diagnostic precision of a person who read bodies the way dictionaries read words: structurally, syllable by syllable. "You're concentrating too hard. It's cream, not a thesis."

"I've never whipped cream before."

"You've never—" A delighted pause. "Tui. You've made pad kra pao from scratch. You've built furniture from garbage. You develop your own film in a bathroom. And you've never whipped cream?"

"I know about vegetarian cooking. Cream isn't vegetarian."

"Cream is dairy."

"Dairy isn't vegan."

"Nobody said anything about vegan. You're overthinking. You always overthink. You overthink the coffee order and the group schedule and whether Est has eaten and whether Hong is sleeping enough and whether William's checked his skin today—you overthink everything except yourself."

Her hands—his hands—found the knots. The specific, tension-holding knots at the junction of Tui's neck and shoulders, the places where the protector stored his weight. The thumbs pressed in. Rotated. And Tui—despite himself, despite the cream, despite every rational argument for continuing the task at hand—exhaled.

"See?" Lego murmured. His lips were against the back of Tui's neck now. Not kissing. Just there. Resting against the skin with the warm, idle pressure of a person who had no agenda other than proximity. "Your body wants to relax. Let it."

"If I relax, I'll stop whipping."

"So stop whipping."

"The cream—"

"The cream can wait."

"It'll warm up. The blog said—"

"The blog." Lego's laugh was a vibration against his vertebrae—a low, sweet, fizzy thing, like champagne bubbling against glass. "You read a blog. You read a baking blog. Tui, who photographs midnight graffiti and listens to post-punk on rooftops,

read a baking blog for me."

"It had good reviews."

"I love you so much I could die."

The word die arrived with the particular, theatrical intensity that Lego brought to all his declarations—not literally, not even hyperbolically, but musically, the word pitched at the frequency of a person who experienced emotion the way they experienced aerial drops: totally, physically, with the full-body commitment of someone who understood that half-measures were more dangerous than going all the way. Lego did not kind of love. Lego did not sort of die. Lego loved with the specific, terrifying, maximum-altitude intensity of a performer who had calculated the distance and committed to the fall.

His arms rewrapped around Tui's waist. Tighter this time. The press against his back deepened—the slip riding up, Tui could feel the hem shifting against the backs of his thighs, and beneath the hem: skin. Bare thighs against the denim of his jeans. The warmth of them. The smoothness of them—Lego's legs, which were shaved and moisturized and maintained with the same obsessive attention as the rest of his body, the legs that wrapped around Tui's waist in bed and gripped silk ribbons fifteen feet off the ground and that were, right now, pressing against the backs of Tui's knees through the thin veil of ivory fabric with a pressure that was technically casual and functionally devastating.

The whisk slowed.

"Lego."

"Mm?"

"I'm trying to make you a cake."

"I know."

"I can't make you a cake if you're—" He gestured vaguely with the whisk. A drop of semi-whipped cream flew off the end and landed on the counter. "—this."

"This?"

"Attached to me."

"I'm always attached to you."

"Not while I'm holding a whisk."

"The whisk makes no difference. You could be holding a chainsaw. I'd still be right here."

"That's concerning."

"That's love, Handsome."

Tui closed his eyes. Opened them. The cream was at soft peaks—half-done, halfway between liquid and structure, the textural equivalent of a person who had started a task and been interrupted by someone who smelled like vanilla and strawberries and the particular, devastating, biologically engineered omega warmth that turned making a cake into surviving a siege.

"Five minutes," Tui said. "Give me five minutes to finish the cream and cut the rest of the fruit and I'll—"

"You'll what?"

The question was innocent. The tone was not. The tone was the underneath tone, the quiet one, the one that existed below the sunshine and the Instagram stories and the public performance of a person who was sweet and bright and everybody's Sweetheart—the tone that lived in the private space between Lego and Tui, the space that was dark and warm and honest, where the words meant exactly what they meant and the meaning was always, always: I want you, do you want me, please want me.

"I'll give you my full attention." Tui said. Carefully. Measuredly. In the voice of a man negotiating a ceasefire with an opponent who was winning.

"I don't want your full attention in five minutes." Lego's mouth moved against the back of Tui's neck—up, by a centimeter, into the hairline, where the skin was thin and the nerve endings were dense and the alpha scent gland was close enough that Lego's breath, when he exhaled, delivered his omega scent directly into the territory where Tui's body processed it not as smell but as instruction. "I want it now."

His tongue touched Tui's skin.

A single, deliberate, precision-targeted contact—the flat of his tongue against the nape of Tui's neck, warm and wet and present in a way that the rest of the contact had not been. The rest had been pressure and warmth and the ambient, background-level stimulation of a person leaning against you. This was specific. This was the tongue piercing—the metal ball, cool against the warm tongue, pressing into Tui's skin with the unmistakable intention of a person who knew exactly which nerve pathway they were activating and was activating it on purpose.

The whisk stopped.

It didn't slow. It stopped. Full cessation. The whisk in the cream, the cream at soft peaks, the strawberries sliced on the board, the cake cooling in the refrigerator—all of it suspended, paused, put on hold by the simple, devastating act of a metal ball

on the back of a neck.

Lego smiled against his skin. Tui felt the smile—the curve of lips, the shift of pressure, the particular, satisfied shape of a mouth that had achieved its objective. The underneath smile. The one that was not for the cameras.

"Tui," Lego whispered. The breath was hot. The name was slow. "Put. The whisk. Down."

He put the whisk down.

The whisk went into the cream bowl with a soft, wet clink that sounded, in the charged quiet of the kitchen, like a surrender flag being planted. The cream, half-whipped, settled around the handle with the patient, unbothered equanimity of a substance that had been interrupted and was content to wait.

Tui turned around.

The motion was controlled—not fast, not slow, the deliberate rotation of a man who was fully aware that the thing in front of him was going to be a problem and who was choosing, with the specific, self-aware courage of a person who had spent his entire life being patient and was now, in this kitchen, with flour on his face and cream on his hands, running out of patience—to face the problem directly.

Lego was right there.

The turning brought them face to face—or rather, face to up, because Lego without his platforms was five foot six and Tui was five foot ten, and the height difference, which was negligible in daily life, became significant in the kitchen, where Lego was barefoot on cold tile and Tui was in shoes and the four inches between them turned Lego's upturned face into something that the photographer's brain categorized, instantly and without permission, as: the most compelling angle I have ever seen.

Lego looked up at him. The light-colored lenses were in—gold, luminous, catching the afternoon light from the kitchen windows. The headband ribbon sat in his hair like a crown. The slip hung from his shoulders by its ribbon bows—two small, satin bows, tied loosely, the kind of knot that existed in the liminal space between fastened and unfastened, where a single pull would convert the former to the latter, and the knowledge of this—the knowledge that the only thing keeping the ivory fabric on Lego's body was two inches of ribbon and the polite cooperation of gravity—was doing something to Tui's rational mind that felt like watching a photograph overdevelop: the image getting darker, more saturated, more intense, until the details that should have been subtle became overwhelming.

"Hi," Lego said again. Looking up. Smiling the underneath smile. His hands found

Tui's chest—the flour-dusted t-shirt, the heartbeat beneath—and rested there with the warm, proprietary confidence of a person who had been given permanent access to this surface and intended to use it.

"Hi."

"You have cream on your thumb."

Tui looked at his right hand. He did. A smear of white, from the whisk, on the pad of his thumb.

Lego took his hand.

Lifted it. The ivory nails curling around Tui's wrist, guiding the hand upward, toward his face, toward his mouth, and Tui—who could see what was coming—did nothing to stop it, because stopping it would have required a kind of willpower that he had spent on the flour-sifting and the cream-chilling and the strawberry-selecting and that was now, at 3:47 PM on a Tuesday in a kitchen, fully depleted.

Lego put Tui's thumb in his mouth.

The cream disappeared. The warmth was immediate—wet, soft, the interior of a mouth that tasted of the lip gloss Lego had been wearing and the ever-present, metallic click of the tongue piercing, which rolled against the pad of Tui's thumb with the deliberate, controlled precision of a person who understood exactly what that particular combination of sensations—tongue and metal and suction and the slow, measured pull of a mouth that was not eating but tasting—would do to an alpha's nervous system.

Lego's eyes stayed open. Gold and steady and looking directly up into Tui's face with the focused, unblinking attention of a person conducting an experiment and monitoring the results in real time. The results were: Tui's pupils dilating. Tui's breathing shifting. Tui's jaw—the jaw, the reliable, well-documented jaw—clenching and unclenching in the specific rhythm that Lego had learned to read as the alpha equivalent of a warning siren, a rising frequency that said the system is approaching capacity, the system is approaching capacity, the system—

Lego pulled the thumb from his mouth. Slowly. The tongue piercing dragged along the pad as it exited—a final, pointed, exclamation-mark contact that left Tui's thumb wet and cool and vibrating with the ghost of sensation.

"The cream's good." Lego said.

Tui's hands found Lego's waist.

The grip was not the post-rut grip—not the territorial, scent-driven, white-knuckled hold of a man reclaiming his omega from the composite scent of a group lunch. This grip was different. This grip was hunger. Simple, straightforward, uncomplicated

hunger—the hunger of a person who had been standing in a kitchen for two hours preparing food for the person he loved and who had just had that person taste the food off his thumb while looking up at him with gold eyes in an ivory slip, and whose body had decided, with the non-negotiable clarity of a system that had reached its absolute, irrevocable, no-appeals-accepted limit, that the cake was going to have to wait.

He lifted Lego onto the counter.

The motion was fluid—one movement, no hesitation, no can I, no pause for negotiation, because Lego's legs were already wrapping around his waist before his body left the ground, the omega anticipating the lift the way a flyer anticipated the catch: by trusting it. By knowing it was coming. By leaping before the hands arrived because the hands always arrived, had always arrived, would always arrive, and the trust was so absolute that it preceded the evidence.

Lego sat on the marble counter. His bare thighs on the cold stone, the slip riding up, the ivory fabric pooling in his lap. His legs around Tui's waist, the ankles locking behind Tui's back, the ivory-painted toes flexing against the denim. His arms around Tui's neck. His hair everywhere—on the counter, in the flour, trailing into the bowl of sliced strawberries, a strand dragging through the red juice and emerging stained pink at the tip.

"The strawberries—" Tui started.

"Forget the strawberries."

"Your hair is in the—"

"Forget. The strawberries."

Tui's mouth found Lego's neck.

The scent was there—concentrated, amplified by the warmth of the kitchen and the heat of Lego's skin and the particular, biochemical generosity of an omega body that had been pressed against its alpha for fifteen minutes and was now, in response to the lift and the grip and the counter and the cold marble against hot skin, producing scent at an elevated rate. The gland at the side of Lego's neck was a broadcast tower—strawberry-vanilla-honey-omega, the signal loud and clear and directed at the one receiver in the world that was calibrated to receive it.

Tui kissed the gland. Open-mouthed,—the slow, deliberate, breathing-into-the-skin kiss that was not about lips but about scent, about claiming, about pressing his own frequency into the omega's broadcast and mixing the signals until they became one station.

Lego's head fell back. The ribbon headband shifted. His throat was exposed—long

and flushed and marked by the fading signatures of the rut, the hickeys that were turning from amber to gold, the impermanent record of a permanent choice.

"Tui—" The name was a sound now, not a word. A vocalization. The omega frequency, climbing, the pitch rising the way it rose in heat, the way it rose when the body was being given what it wanted and was choosing to announce it, loudly, shamelessly, with the complete vocal commitment of a person who had never learned to be quiet during pleasure and had no intention of starting. "Tui—"

Tui's mouth moved down. Past the gland. Over the collarbone. To the edge of the slip—the lace panel, the frame, the decorative border between covered and exposed. His teeth caught the lace. Pulled. Not hard—gently, with the controlled, careful tension of a person who understood that lace was fragile and that fragility was not a reason to avoid touching something but a reason to touch it well.

The lace yielded. The neckline shifted. The ribbon bow on Lego's left shoulder loosened—the satin sliding through the loop, the knot dissolving, one side of the slip falling away to reveal the shoulder, the clavicle, the chest, the nipple piercing on the left side catching the kitchen light with a small, sharp glint of silver.

Lego inhaled. Sharp. The inhale of a person whose body had just been partially unwrapped and who was feeling, with the full, amplified sensitivity of an omega near an alpha, the air on newly exposed skin—the contrast between the slip's warmth and the kitchen's cool, the vulnerability of uncovering, the specific, intimate thrill of being undone.

"The other one," Lego breathed. "The other bow."

Tui's fingers found the second ribbon. The right shoulder. He pulled—slowly, watching, the photographer's eye tracking the movement with the same absorbed attention he brought to watching film emerge in the developing bath: the ribbon sliding, the satin releasing, the knot coming apart strand by strand until the bow was just two parallel lines of fabric and the slip had nothing holding it up except the compression of their bodies and the incidental architecture of Lego's crossed arms around Tui's neck.

Tui took Lego's arms and lowered them.

Gently. Deliberately. Guiding the hands down from his neck to his sides, the ivory nails trailing down his chest, and as the arms lowered, the slip fell.

The fabric descended in stages— Past the shoulders. Past the collarbones. Past the chest—the nipple piercings appearing in sequence, left then right, two silver points in flushed skin. Past the stomach—the navel piercing, the third star. Past the waist. Into the lap, where it pooled, ivory on marble, the ghost of a garment that had served its purpose and was now, officially, retired.

Lego sat on the counter in nothing.

Nothing except the piercings and the earrings and the ribbon headband and the hair—the hair that was in the strawberries, the hair that had flour in it, the hair that was so impractical and so beautiful and so fundamentally, stubbornly Lego that removing it from the equation would be like removing the color from a photograph: technically possible, but the resulting image would be a lie.

"You—" Tui started, and his voice was gone. Not hoarse—gone. The voice had been decommissioned. The alpha vocal system had been repurposed from speech to something more fundamental, more urgent, more compatible with the situation at hand, which was: a naked omega on a kitchen counter, smelling of strawberry and vanilla and sex, looking at him with gold eyes that said well? The cake can wait. I can't.

Lego reached for him.

Not pulling—inviting. The hands extended, the ivory nails catching the light, the fingers opening like a flower—the same gesture, the same patient, generous, come-to-me offering that he made on the aerial silks when he extended his arms into the empty air, trusting that the silk would be there, that the catch would be guaranteed, that the falling was safe because someone—something—was always ready to hold him.

Tui stepped into the invitation.

The counter was the exact right height. He hadn't planned this—hadn't measured the counter against Lego's seated height against his own standing height, the way a more calculating person might have—but the alignment was there, provided by the kitchen designer and the furniture installer and the particular, happy accident of a counter that was meant for chopping vegetables and was now serving a purpose that the interior decorator had almost certainly not envisioned.

His hands went to Lego's thighs. The skin was cool from the marble—a contrast that made the warmth of his palms feel electric, the temperature difference registering in both their bodies as a spark, a small, physical ignition that said different temperatures, same heat. He parted Lego's legs wider. Stepped between them. The denim of his jeans against the bare interior of Lego's thighs, the rough-soft contrast, and Lego—

Lego moaned.

Softer. More surprised. The sound of a person being touched in a mundane space—a kitchen, with flour on the counter and cream in the bowl and a cake in the refrigerator—and discovering that mundane spaces were, when the right person was doing the touching, as electric as any bedroom, any darkroom, any bathtub, any crash mat beneath a silk.

"You're still dressed." Lego said. Accusatory. The tone of a person who had identified an inequality and was demanding its immediate rectification.

"I'm not done with you yet."

"You haven't started with me—"

"I've been starting with you for an hour. You've been starting with me since you walked in wearing—" Tui glanced at the fallen slip, puddled in Lego's lap like a liquid. "—a napkin."

"It's La Perla."

"It's a napkin with ribbons."

"It cost more than your camera bag."

"Everything you own costs more than my camera bag. That's not a metric."

Lego laughed—the bright, fizzy, involuntary laugh that came out when he was delighted and aroused simultaneously, the laugh that was one of Tui's favorite sounds in the world because it was unscripted, unperformable, as authentic as the click of a Leica shutter or the sound of bass through sand—and then the laugh was swallowed by Tui's mouth, because Tui kissed him.

The kiss was not gentle.

The kiss was the culmination of two hours of patience—patience while sifting flour, patience while creaming butter, patience while slicing strawberries that smelled like the person he wanted to taste, patience while that person materialized in a transparent slip and pressed against his back and hummed and breathed on his neck and put his thumb in his mouth—two hours of patience distilled into a single, concentrated, zero-patience contact. Tui's mouth on Lego's mouth. Tui's tongue against Lego's tongue, against the piercing, the metal ball clicking against his teeth in the rhythm that had become as familiar as his own heartbeat: click, click, click, the percussion of a kiss between a person with a tongue piercing and a person who had learned to love the click the way he loved the click of his camera, as the sound that preceded a capture.

Lego's hands went everywhere. Into Tui's hair—flour-transferring, the white powder dusting the brown strands. Down his back—nails through the t-shirt, the ivory polish leaving ghost-trails on the black fabric. To the hem—pulling upward, the insistent, urgent, get-this-off-you tug of a person who had been naked on a counter for thirty seconds and was outraged by the continued existence of clothing.

Tui let the shirt be taken. Over his head. Into the flour on the counter. Gone.

Lego's hands were on his chest immediately. The ivory nails on bare skin. The

diagnostic touch—but not diagnostic now. Now the touch was claiming. Lego's palms flat on Tui's pectorals, the fingers spread, the hands pressing into the muscle with the firm, possessive intention of a person who was not reading the body but owning it. Feeling the heartbeat. Feeling the breath. Feeling the particular, specific, irreplaceable aliveness of the alpha's body and saying, through palm pressure alone: this is mine. This chest is mine. This heartbeat is mine.

"The cream is going to warm up." Tui murmured against Lego's mouth.

"I don't care."

"The blog said—"

"I'm going to kill the blog—"

Tui lifted him off the counter.

The motion was the same as before—fluid, one-movement, no hesitation—but the destination was different. Not the counter. Not the bedroom. Not the couch or the crash mat or the bathtub or any of the other surfaces that their relationship had consecrated through use.

The kitchen floor.

Specifically: the tile. The cool, clean, recently-mopped tile of a kitchen that had been cleaned by Tui that morning in preparation for the baking experiment, because Tui did not cook in dirty spaces, because hygiene in the kitchen was as non-negotiable as precision in the darkroom, because the same philosophy—respect the surface, respect the process, respect the thing you're making—applied to food as it applied to photographs as it applied to the person he was now laying down on the tile with the careful, reverent attention of a man placing a negative on a light table.

Lego's back touched the tile and he gasped—the sharp, delighted intake of a body encountering cold on hot, the marble-smooth surface of the kitchen floor against the heat-flushed skin of his back and his shoulders and the curve of his spine. His hair fanned across the white tile like a developing photograph—black on white, the highest-contrast image possible, every strand visible, every detail preserved.

"The floor?" Lego said. The word pitched upward—not with objection but with glee, the particular, gleaming, mischief-bright delight of a person who had expected the bedroom and had been given the kitchen floor and who found the kitchen floor not just acceptable but better, because the kitchen floor was unexpected, and unexpected was Lego's favorite thing, the thing that no amount of money or distance or boxes of unopened gifts had ever been able to provide, the thing that only happened when someone knew you well enough to surprise you and cared enough to try.

"The floor." Tui confirmed. He was above Lego—hands braced on either side of Lego's head, knees between Lego's spread legs, the position the same as the bed and the crash mat but the context entirely different: domestic, mundane, the kitchen light overhead instead of the bedroom's dark, the hum of the refrigerator, containing the cake, the cake that was cooling, the cake that was waiting, a quiet, persistent reminder that this had started as a baking project and had become something else entirely.

"There's flour on the floor." Lego said.

"There's flour on you."

Lego looked down at himself. There was. Flour on his stomach—a white handprint, Tui's handprint, transferred from Tui's palm to Lego's skin during the lift. Flour on his thigh. Flour in his hair, making the black strands look faintly silver at the tips, like the first frost on a dark branch.

"You've breaded me," Lego said, and the laugh that followed—the helpless, full-body, delighted laugh of a person who was lying naked on a kitchen floor covered in flour while a cake cooled in the fridge and a bowl of half-whipped cream sat on the counter and sliced strawberries waited on a cutting board and none of it, none of it, mattered as much as the man above him who was looking at him with the focused, hungry, absolutely devoted attention of a photographer who had found the shot of his life—the laugh was the best sound Tui had ever heard.

Better than bass through sand. Better than the Leica's click. Better than the sound of his name in the dark.

He kissed the flour off Lego's stomach.

The skin beneath the white powder was warm and smooth and tasted of—nothing. Skin. Just skin. The most honest taste in the world, the taste beneath every perfume and every product and every curated, constructed, carefully maintained surface: the taste of a person, unadorned, unperformed, as real as the flour and the tile and the cake cooling in the dark of the refrigerator.

Lego's hands found his hair. Sank in. Held. The grip—strong, aerial-strong, the grip of a person who held their body weight by their hands and who was now holding Tui's head against their stomach with the same committed, don't-let-go intensity—was a direction. A map. Here. Stay here. Keep going.

Tui kept going.

Down. Past the stomach. Past the navel piercing—a kiss to the metal, a click of his teeth against the barbell, and Lego's hips jerked upward, the tile-cooled skin of his back lifting off the floor for a second before settling back down with a sound that was half smack and half sigh. Past the hip bones—the sharp, delicate architecture of

Lego's pelvis, the bones prominent and beautiful in the way that structural elements were beautiful: not decorative but functional, the frame that held everything else up. Tui kissed both hip bones. One, then the other. Two points on a map. The borders of a territory he knew by heart.

"Tui—" The name was climbing. The pitch was rising. The kitchen acoustics were different from the bedroom's—no soft furnishings to absorb the sound, no curtains or crash mats or pillows, just hard surfaces and clean angles, and the sound of Lego's voice bounced off the tile and the marble and the stainless-steel appliances and returned to them amplified, clarified, every note and every frequency preserved and reflected back. The kitchen was an echo chamber for pleasure, and Lego—vocal, shameless, incapable of quiet—was filling it.

"Tui—please—"

The please was unnecessary. Tui was already there. His mouth was already on the inside of Lego's thigh—the soft, sensitive, unmarked territory where the skin was thinnest and the scent was strongest, the omega's body concentrating its sweetest, most persuasive biochemistry in the places that the alpha would find last, a biological breadcrumb trail that led, inexorably, inevitably, to the center.

Lego's legs opened wider. His feet—bare, ivory-nailed, flour-dusted—slid on the tile, the smooth surface offering no friction, no resistance, and the lack of resistance was—God—the lack of resistance was the whole point. The tile was not the crash mat. The tile did not grip and hold. The tile was a surface that offered nothing except itself—cool, hard, clean—and asked nothing except honesty.

Tui tasted him.

No preamble. No warning. No careful, measured, photographer's approach—no let me adjust the angle, let me find the light. Just the mouth, and the tongue, and the devastating, focused, unhurried attention of a man who had spent the last two hours making a cake and was now making something else: making Lego shake.

The sound Lego made hit the tile and the ceiling and the stainless-steel refrigerator and came back multiplied.

A cry. Not a word—a frequency. The omega frequency at full volume, produced by a body that was lying on a kitchen floor in a penthouse in Thonglor with flour in its hair and strawberry juice on the tips of its strands and its alpha between its legs, and the body did not care about the flour or the strawberries or the cream softening in its bowl or the cake cooling in the dark. The body cared about this. About the tongue and the piercing-less mouth and the patience, the terrible, exquisite, relentless patience of a man who had learned, on a Pattaya shore, that the tide came in on its own schedule and the only response was to stand in the wet sand and let it, and who applied this same philosophy to making the person he loved

come apart on the kitchen floor.

"Tui—"

Tui didn't stop.

He devoured him. That was the word—not tasted, not kissed, not any of the polite, sanitized verbs that the rational mind would have preferred. Devoured. The way you devoured something that was sweet and real and made by hand, something that you had been smelling for hours—the strawberry, the vanilla, the honey—without tasting, and the tasting, when it finally came, was so much more than the smelling that the difference was not degree but kind, not volume but dimension, a leap from two-dimensional scent to three-dimensional flavor, and the flavor was—

Lego.

Lego and the omega sweetness and the warm, clean, honey-salt taste of a body that had been cared for and maintained and offered up with the full, unguarded generosity of a person who believed that love was physical and physical was love and that the most honest thing two bodies could do was feed each other.

Lego's back arched off the tile—the arabesque, the drop, the shape his body defaulted to when the sensation exceeded the capacity for stillness. His hands pulled Tui's hair. His heels pressed into Tui's back—the strong legs, the silk-trained legs, gripping with the force of a body that was falling and catching simultaneously. The sounds he was making had left the domain of language entirely and entered the domain of music—a continuous, escalating, rhythmic vocalization that rose and fell and rose again, climbing toward a peak that the kitchen acoustics caught and held and reflected back in an echo that made it sound like there were two Legos, three Legos, a choir of Legos, all of them gasping and crying and saying Tui's name in every key.

He came with his hands in Tui's hair and his heels on Tui's back and his head thrown back on the tile floor, the ribbon headband finally slipping free, the ivory satin trailing across the white tile like a bookmark in a story that had lost its page.

Tui stayed. Gentled. Let the aftershocks move through the body beneath him, the small, involuntary tremors of a nervous system recalibrating from overload to baseline. He pressed a kiss to Lego's inner thigh. To his hip bone. To the navel piercing. To the flour handprint on his stomach, still visible, a white ghost on flushed skin.

He rested his cheek on Lego's stomach. Felt the breathing—rapid, slowing, the rhythm of a body coming back to sea level after altitude.

"The cream." Lego said.

His voice was wrecked. Beautiful. The vocal equivalent of a photograph that had been overexposed and had come out, against all technical logic, more gorgeous for the excess.

"What?"

"The cream. Is definitely. Warm by now."

Tui laughed. Against Lego's stomach, the vibration traveling through the skin, making the muscles flutter. The real laugh. The deep one.